The NASHVILLE SOUND

Bright Lights and Country Music

PAUL HEMPHILL

FOREWORD BY DON CUSIC

"The best book ever written about country music."

Chicago Sun-Times

VISIT…

MORE PRAISE FOR *THE NASHVILLE SOUND*

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"While the exploration of the church-burning is the framework of the book, it is Hemphill's evocation of the dynamics of Little River that really stands out."—*Oxford American*

"Skillfully researched and written with a novelist's sure touch." —*Publishers Weekly*

PRAISE FOR *KING OF THE ROAD: A NOVEL*

"Jake Hawkins is a lot like my own dad was, and this book took me home. *King of the Road* is a Southern masterpiece, and one of the finest things I've ever read by any writer."—Johnny Cash

"Here's a tale that starts in the gut but ultimately comes to live in the heart. Paul Hemphill is, and has been for a long time, one of the best reads in the country."—Harry Crews

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"Hemphill has done a rare, terrible, and implacable thing. He has told the truth. This is a wonderful book."—Anne Rivers Siddons

PRAISE FOR *LONG GONE: A NOVEL*

"So good, so true, so full of tolerant cynicism about palpable villains, so full of love for people who deserve better than they get, and so knowing in its delineation of whatever he chooses to delineate. . . . Paul Hemphill has quick hands, he can go to his right or to his left,

he gets plenty of wood on the ball, he's not just up there for a cup of coffee, and he isn't just writing about baseball any more than [Ring] Lardner."—Gilbert Millstein, *New York Times Book Review*

"As a writer, Hemphill bears comparison to Faulkner in his lighter moods. We move beyond laughs and toward literature. A first-rate novel."—Pete Axthelm, *Newsweek*

PRAISE FOR *THE GOOD OLD BOYS*

"Man, you sure can write!"—Merle Haggard

"Hemphill writes about the South as one enduring the hangover of a passionate love affair: the memory of the tenderness is still there, but there is pain, too."—Bruce Cook, *National Observer*

"It is Hemphill's special talent that he does not turn his subjects into 'creatures' as he writes about them, although his gallery of characters includes some exotic folks all right. But they all emerge from Hemphill's mind and through his language as just people after all, mortal human beings to whom strange things have happened. . . . [He] is a first-rate southern writer whose voice is now obviously ready to command national attention."—Gurney Norman, *Rolling Stone*

PRAISE FOR *LEAVING BIRMINGHAM: NOTES OF A NATIVE SON*

"The well-told personal story of how history strikingly affected a city and one of its vagabond white sons. In Paul Hemphill, that past burns white hot and will not die."—Charles Morgan Jr., lawyer and founder of the American Civil Liberties Union's Southern Office.

"*Leaving Birmingham* is family memoir, social history, political chronicle . . . Paul Hemphill tells a story that can interest any reader who tracks the spore of American lives in the twentieth century."
—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

THE NASHVILLE SOUND

BRIGHT LIGHTS AND COUNTRY MUSIC

Paul Hemphill

Foreword by **Don Cusic**

The University of Georgia Press
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For Susan, who endured

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FOREWORD TO THE 2015 EDITION

The year 1970 was a tipping point for country music. The roots of the music ran deep into a rural society that was agrarian based, working class when working class meant manual labor, comfortable and supportive of segregation, intensely patriotic to the point of supporting any war the government waged, and deeply religious with a Christian fundamentalism that pervaded the background of country fans and performers. But the '60s brought the Baby Boomers, who populated college campuses and ushered in a counterculture that embraced a sexual revolution, drug use, and the second wave of rock'n'roll.

Country music was a counter to the counterculture and it wrestled with these changes, which affected country music's sound as it moved away from what many described as whiney and twangy toward a smooth "countrypolitan" sound of strings instead of fiddles and the piano instead of the steel guitar. This was the Nashville Sound, part of an effort to make country music more palatable to the middle class. Country artists, wanting to be accepted as part of mainstream American music, sought to be more contemporary and less representative of the "hillbilly" image they had been saddled with.

In 1970, *The Nashville Sound: Bright Lights and Country Music* by Paul Hemphill was published. Here, for the first time, a respected journalist with southern roots (he was born in Birmingham and was on the staff of the *Atlanta Journal*) and college educated (Auburn and Harvard) spent an extended period of time (two months) in Nashville and interviewed around 150 people in order to profile country music. In his book, Hemphill reports on the tug-of-war in country music: those on one side anchored in the rural past and wanting the music to cling to its early roots vs. those pulling country music into the world of contemporary America. His book is both a snapshot and a movie, defining country as it had been in the distant past, as it was at the end of the '60s, and where it was headed as the twentieth century lurched forward.

Hemphill was not the first journalist to write about country music; a number of others had come from the North loaded with stereotypes and spent a few days among the country music culture reporting and reinforcing those stereotypes, while others attempted to enlighten the public that those stereotypes didn't really fit. Many other books on country music existed at the time, but Hemphill's was the first by a journalist whose research was rooted in history and amplified by interviews. He blended the past of country music with profiles of the movers and shakers of the then-contemporary industry and explored the music that provided a soundtrack for the lives of Americans known as the "silent majority" and the world in which that music was created.

Hemphill's book begins with "Friday Night at Tootsie's Orchid Lounge," a scene at a popular watering hole for both fans and members of the country music community. It serves as a time capsule of a rowdy country bar across the back alley from the Grand Ole Opry.

In the "Music City, U.S.A." chapter, Hemphill explores the division between the country music community and the social elite of Nashville. In a chapter on Chet Atkins, Hemphill

presents a day-in-the-life of this influential head of RCA Records, musician, and producer of records that defined the Nashville Sound. There was deep concern among country fans and professionals in the country music business that the music had sold its soul to pop, that pop was not only trespassing but also polluting the essence of country music. The counterargument was that country music had to progress into the '70s musically alive for the future rather than dead and buried in the past.

The ghost of Hank Williams haunts the narrative throughout the book, winding around the past, present, and future of country music while holding the past and present together. Through Hank, Hemphill stitches the stories of Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family together with then-current acts like Johnny Cash, Roger Miller, Eddy Arnold, and Glen Campbell.

In his chapter on Owen Bradley, another producer who helped define the Nashville Sound, Hemphill visits a Kitty Wells session after meeting with producer Bradley. The scene displays a former big band leader who had worked with jazz great Pete Fountain but was also in tune with the sound of Kitty Wells. Bradley had built the first studio on what became Music Row; in this chapter, he is interviewed at Bradley's Barn, another studio he built.

Names like Pete Fountain, Bob Dylan, Perry Como, Al Hirt, Nancy Sinatra, and Ann Margaret, who all recorded in Nashville, run through the narrative to demonstrate the musical appeal of Nashville outside the city limits. They are both a blessing and a curse; the non-country acts make Nashville "legitimate" but they also threaten the bedrock of country music.

There are chapters on the wannabes—those aspiring to country music stardom—and those on the edge of major-label country music. How do you "make it" in country music? The mystery remains intact, although Hemphill profiles

those who made it and those who did not, and one main theme emerges: there's a huge gulf between those who make it and those who don't.

In the section "White Soul," Hemphill discusses the Carter Family and the early years of country music as well as the gospel roots or, more specifically, the Christian fundamentalism that winds through the country music story like a scarlet thread.

The author gives a nod to the Singing Cowboys, whose movies guided country music and country artists to national exposure, in the chapter on Tex Ritter, who moved to Nashville after the Singing Cowboys had ridden into the sunset. In "Days of Dollars" Hemphill expands on what a number of other out-of-town journalists had reported and illuminates the big business side of country music. It wasn't just a sound, it was a business—and a highly profitable one at that.

An interview with DeFord Bailey, the great African-American harmonica player who was once a star on the Grand Ole Opry until he was booted off, is held at Bailey's shoeshine stand. The element of race and country music is exposed in this chapter with a nod to Charley Pride, an African-American who was a country music superstar in 1970.

Country music wasn't confined to Nashville; there was Bakersfield, California where Buck Owens and Merle Haggard kept the traditional flame alive. This book was written before "Okie From Muskogee" hit, so Haggard's early life is spotlighted but not his link to the culture wars through that song.

Throughout is the juxtaposition of the early days of country music, which was defined by a sound, against the present and future when country music was becoming increasingly defined by the market. What sells is good, and if it doesn't sell, then there's no future. Country music has always been a survivor.

Since Paul Hemphill's book was published there have been numerous books on country music, from biographies to aca-

demic histories to journalistic profiles. Hemphill's book continues to stand at the front of the line for those who explore the tensions in country music, the fight to keep it "pure" vs. the quest to make it profitable, the conflict of clinging to the past while racing towards the future. Many others have tried to do what Paul Hemphill did, but none have done it better. At more than forty-five years old, *The Nashville Sound* is the senior statesman of country music books, holding wisdom for those who seek answers to the who, what, when, where, why, and how of country music.

—Don Cusic

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PREFACE

The best times we ever had together were when we were riding over the mountains at night. My old man would be leaning against his door, half chewing and half smoking an El Producto cigar, wiggling his toes in the sandals and thin white cotton socks that helped him bear the athlete's feet earned from a lifetime of driving big trucks, hanging his beet-red left arm out the window and stiffening his pale right one at the elbow to make it easier to fight the belching four-ton Dodge around the curves, now and then looking in the rear-view mirror to check on the swaying trailer that was loaded to the ceiling with giant spools of cotton twine headed for the Goodyear plant in Akron. It would be three o'clock in the morning and we would be barreling over the eerie Blue Ridge Mountains, trying to make time before the sun came up and brought with it the tourists and "the boys," as he called the weight-station cops. And the only noise other than the whining of the tires and the groaning of the motor came from the radio, which was tuned to a high-powered out· law station that boomed all the way up from the Mexican border and played country music all night for people like us. XERF, I think it was, Villa Acuña, Mexico. A jakeleg preacher sell-

ing anything short of autographed eight-by-ten glossy photographs of Jesus, now and then jolting his audience awake with a terrifying cry of JEEE-zus!!! *And the world-ah will not-ah be saved-ah until-ah it drinks-ah of the precious. blood-ah . . . JEEE-zus!!! . . . Thank you, Sister Maybelline, for that inspiring Hymn of the Day . . . That's one thousand baby chicks, friends, sex not guaranteed . . . Write Jesus, Post Office Box Twelve, Del Rio, Texas . . . For as long as He makes this offer possible . . . GLOW-ree Hallay-LEW-yah!!!* And after the "preacher" had finished paying the bills he would slap another record on the tuntable and maybe it would be a girl singer named Jean Shepard doing a song which was very popular then because the Korean War was on and there were at least half a million GIs over there who knew exactly what she was talking about—

Dear John, oh how I hate to write
Dear John, I must let you know tonight;
That my love for you has died,
Like the grass upon the lawn;
And tonight I wed another, Dear John . . .

—and my old man would maybe shift a little in the seat and glance over at me, half awake and bleary-eyed and trying to get comfortable against the rattling door of the cab, and he would twist the cigar in his mouth for dramatic pause and finally say, after mulling it over for a few seconds "Hell of a thing to do to some old boy, ain't it?"

To do this book, I lived in Nashville, Tenn., "hillbilly heaven, for nearly two months, where I saw a dozen performances of the Grand Ole Opry and countless recording sessions and television tapings. I also visited with Glen Campbell at the CBS television studios in Hollywood rode along with Bill Anderson and the Po' Boys as they played a string of one-nighters in New England, sat in a tiny dressing room in Bakersfield, Calif., while son-of-an-Okie Merle Haggard

loosened up his tonsils with straight bourbon before singing for the home folks, and sat in an isolated cabin in Northeast Georgia while an old mountaineer played his homemade fiddle the only way he knows how. In all, I traveled 18,000 air miles, interviewed about 150 people and listened exclusively to country music for seven months.

But now that it's over and I look back, I can see that no amount of research could beat what I learned about country music from my old man, and from being raised in the South. Because country music has always been the soul music of the white South. It came over from Europe on the first boats, and the reason it survived in places like Appalachia and Canada and rural New England and East Texas and central California—and quickly died in places like Richmond and Boston and Philadelphia—is that the music, like the people who clung to it, was earthy and simple and conservative and, in its own peculiar way, religious. My old man, who came out of a hamlet in East Tennessee when he was thirteen years old and spent his whole life working the coal mines and the railroads and the truck lines out of Birmingham, came a lot closer to understanding Jimmie Rodgers ("Well, I'm goin' to California/Where they sleep out every night") than he did, say, Kate Smith, for God's sake. So he listened to the country stations because they spoke his language, and he really couldn't care less if most of the rest of the country *did* call it "hillbilly" music. The music was his music, and he liked it, and it did something for him when he heard it, and that is what music is supposed to be all about.

So this book isn't so much about music as it is about people: the people it is *by* and the people it is *for*, and how and why. There has been a handful of books on country music, but their approach has been scholarly and/or historical. They have their place, of course. A lot of people would like to know what a shaped note is, or whether the three-finger

banjo-picking style means three *fingers* or *two* fingers and a *thumb*, or what is the true origin of the steel guitar. Fine. But a banjo can't talk. Scoopie Brucie Harper of Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, Nashville, Tenn., can. And does. Often, at length, and with soul, and I love him, whether he believes it or not.

—Paul Hemphill,
Atlanta, July 1969

PROLOGUE

FRIDAY NIGHT AT TOOTSIE'S ORCHID LOUNGE

If You Don't Clean Your Tab in 1968, Your Credit Is No Damn Good in 1969.

Thank You.
TOOTSIE.

—NOTICE BEHIND THE BAR AT TOOTSIE'S ORCHID LOUNGE, NASHVILLE, TENN.

"Naw, I said Harper. HAR-per. Same as in 'Harper Valley PTA.' Scoopie Brucie Harper, The Country Man from Dixieland. Everybody's always asking me how come they started calling me 'Scoopie Brucie.' Well, I was a kid working at this station, see, and one day one of the announcers wanted me to go strip some wire copy for him and he said, 'Go get the scoop, Bruce,' and that was it. They been calling me Scoopie Brucie ever since. Jerry Lee Lewis, hell. I got Jerry one of his first jobs, working this club for five bucks a night and all

he could eat. He hadn't been working there more'n one night when the owner called me and said, 'This kid ain't got a bottom to his stomach,' and the next night he called me and screamed, 'Now he's torn up my piano; this guy's costing me five *hundred* a night.' Hell of a story, huh? Lots of good stories around here, boy, if you just get out and look for 'em. Charlene, honey, there's a hole in this glass. . . ."

Early Friday night in Nashville. The cold fog rising off the Cumberland River bottoms at the low end of Broadway, stalking up the broad neon avenue like a swirling gray shark, frosting the windows of Linebaugh's Restaurant and Ernest Tubb's Record Shop and Roy Acuff Exhibits and Sho-Bud Guitars, snapping at the people. Truck drivers from Wheeling and lathe operators from Gary and their plain women in thin cotton Sears dresses, picking over the latest Kitty Wells albums at Buckley's Record Shop No. 2, then moving like sheep down to the novelty shops on Opry Place to giggle over the cheap glass souvenirs and kitchen plaques ("Kissin' Don't Last, But Cookin' Do"), finally shuffling up to the front steps of the Grand Ole Opry House and getting in line for the Friday Night Opry. But the smart ones, the ones who know how cold it can get in Middle Tennessee on a January night, are sitting in the scarred booths at Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, a ten-second sprint from the Opry House, gawking at the glossy eight-by-tens of country-music stars that blanket the walls, listening in awe while Tootsie unloads on a drunk weaving on a stool at the counter ("I ain't gonna have no damn drunks in *my* place"), observing a duel between two Opry pickers at the pinball machine ("Tilt, my ass, you made it do two laps around the bar"), keeping an eye peeled on the front door in case Little Jimmy Dickens happens to come by to wet his whistle before going to work, and tapping their feet on the checkerboard linoleum floor while Loretta Lynn twangs "Don't Come Home A-drinkin' with Lovin' on Your Mind" over the jukebox—

You thought that I'd be waitin' up
When you came home last niiiight,
You'd been out with all the boys
And you ended up half-tiiiight;
But liquor and love they just don't mix,
Leave the bottle or me behiiiind;
And don't come home a-drinkin'
With lovin' on your miiiind . . .

—and here is Scoopie Brucie Harper sitting at the counter, in a checked sport shirt and a Western string tie and a plaid summer sports coat shot through with cigarette burns, watching the suds build up as the Oertel's beer slides into the glass, and saying, "Been a country deejay for almost twenty years, and everybody knows me. Sort of between jobs right now. Thinking about going down to Jacksonville with WVOJ if they make the right kind of deal. WVOJ, that's for 'Voice of Jacksonville.' Yessir, you came to the right place, all right. Scoopie Brucie can tell you anything you need to know about country music, and if I can't I can find somebody who can. I been around here since the old days when if you had a song idea you'd just call up somebody and say, 'I got a great one here,' and you'd sing a couple of bars over the phone and if they liked it they'd tell you to get on down to the Tulane Hotel for a recording session. It's sure changed a lot since—hey, there's old Harold Weakley over there. Hey, Harold, come here, I want you to meet somebody. Tootsie's son-in-law. Plays drums at the Opry. Tell us how long you been playing the Opry, Harold."

"Well, it's been about . . ."

"This is important now. Fella's writing a book and we gotta get everything right. Go ahead, tell him."

". . . nine years . . ."

"See there?"

". . . without missing. Every Friday and Saturday night."

"Harold sings, too. Good singer. Tell him about your singing, Harold. Go ahead. Talk up."

"I sing a little. Not as much as I used to."

"Come on, Harold, tell us about the first time you played the Opry. You gotta get this. This is great. Don't be so damned bashful, Harold."

Weakley grins and digs out a piece of fried chicken with a toothpick and sucks his teeth, making a sound like air brakes on a diesel rig. "You don't ever forget the first time you play the Opry," he says. "I remember I was supposed to play for Billy Walker on the Bill Monroe show. Something happened, I don't know what, but Monroe and Walker was the only stars that showed up, so Bill, Bill Monroe, not Walker, he came up to me and said, 'Son, you're gonna have to sing so we can fill up the time.' Talk about being scared. Anyway, I sang a spiritual . . ."

"Listen."

". . . about the only thing I knew . . ."

"Get this now."

". . . and I got five encores."

Scoopie Brucie can't stand it any more. "See, what'd I tell you? You came to the right place. You could probably sit right here in Tootsie's and do your whole book. Hey, one thing you've got to do, you've got to check up on old Jack Toombs. Jack wrote 'Almost' back in the Fifties while he was driving a cab. Wrote it on the back side of a trip sheet one night and George Morgan made a big hit out of it. See? I got all these stories. . . ."

One thing Scoopie Brucie was right about is Tootsie's Orchid Lounge. If it takes character to make a great bar, then Tootsie's is a great bar: a sprawling collection of smoky rooms where the worshipers, the gods, the would-be gods and, by all means, the angels of country music come together

on Opry weekends in a dizzy melange of blinking Falstaff signs and pinging pinball machines and a throbbing jukebox, everybody committed to the proposition that Roy Acuff will still be wailing "Wabash Cannonball" when Leonard Bernstein is gone and forgotten. If the Grand Ole Opry is the Jerusalem and the Masters Tournament of country music, then Tootsie's Orchid Lounge is its Wailing Wall and its nineteenth hole.

Tootsie is Tootsie Bess, a tiny but spirited woman who was born in Hohenwald, Tenn. ("the same place Rod Brasfield come from"), some 70 miles southwest of Nashville. Tootsie used to be married to Big Jeff Bess, and was the singer-comedienne-ticket seller for Big Jeff and the Radio Playboys during World War II when they began every day with a 90-minute early-morning radio show over WLAC in Nashville and then fanned out into the surrounding countryside for stage appearances. When she and Big Jeff split, she opened Tootsie's Orchid Lounge.

In its ten years, the place has become an institution. "One time I threatened to sell out, and everybody said if I did they'd just move out to my house," says Tootsie. She gets the new-model jukebox "before they even come out" and says the distributor feeds her $10 worth of change every month to prime it with ("If your record makes the jukebox at Tootsie's you've got it made," they say around Music Row). There are at least 1,000 publicity pictures of past and present Opry stars covering the walls downstairs, and more than 200 autographs on the upstairs walls. If a star comes in, Tootsie slips over to the jukebox and plays every record of his on the machine in his honor. Opry star Del Reeves shot the cover for his album "Good Time Charlie's" inside Tootsie's, several scenes for a low-budget country-music movie called *Nashville Rebel* were filmed there, and Tootsie herself has been talked into recording two singles about her place ("Sat-

urday Night at Tootsie's" was the title of one song). The local beer distributor tells her that she sells more beer than anybody in town. At closing time Tootsie breaks out a police whistle and starts yelling, "All right, drink up and get the hell out," and then walks down the line of barstools at the counter, jabbing the slow drinkers with a diamond-headed three-inch hatpin presented her by Charley Pride, the only Negro star in country music.

But the ones who appreciate Tootsie's the most are the boys who wander into Nashville cold, hoping against hope to make it as a writer or picker or singer. There is no way to estimate how many of these there are in Nashville at a given moment except to say the number is considerable. They hitchhike or ride in on a Trailways, get a room at the YMCA or in a cheap boardinghouse, start knocking on doors along Music Row (where they run into a phalanx of secretaries cooing "*Whom* shall I say is calling?"), and eventually, when their spirits are as low as their resources, they wind up at Tootsie's Orchid Lounge. Tootsie is a pushover for them. A constant total of $500 in bad checks and $1,500 in unpaid tabs, kept together in a cigar box behind the bar near a notice that says NO BEER TABS FOR NO BODY—POLICE ORDERS, attests to her generosity. But she knows just as well as the down-and-outers that 20 years ago Carl Smith, for one, was in the same shape; and now, they also know, Carl Smith owns a 350-acre ranch in Franklin, Tenn.

Later, when the Friday Night Opry let out, the tide came sweeping back into Tootsie's and soon there wasn't a seat to be had. In the booth nearest the front door a stocky man with a wind-whipped red face and burnt-orange hair and long sideburns sipped beer from a bottle and drummed his fingernails on the table while Bobby Bare sang "Detroit City" on the jukebox. His clothes were cheap and frayed, a lightweight sports coat over a short-sleeved polo shirt buttoned

at the neck, and he was still shivering after the short dash through the cold from the Opry House.

"Mind if I sit down?" he was asked.

"Naw, come on in."

"Thank you. It's crowded tonight."

"Always is. Tootsie, she does a good business."

"Been to the Opry, I guess."

"Yeah," he said. "Backstage."

"You must play, or something."

"Naw. I mean, I'm trying to get into it. Me and Dale and Leroy, that's these boys I'm staying with, we all went. They know near 'bout everybody over there. We got backstage for nothing."

He said his name was Tommy Higgins, age thirty-five, from Waco, Texas, and that he had been in Nashville for about a month. He had always wanted to be a country songwriter, so he jammed $50 and a lot of songs in his pocket and struck out for Music City, U.S.A. "Wadn't easy gettin' here neither," he said as Charlene brought another beer. "Me and this old boy was talking and having a drank about one in the morning in Waco, and when I told him I oughta go to Nashville he said, 'Let's go.' See, he had a car and I didn't. Well, I guess he sobered up, or else he flat got scared when he heard me singing some o' my songs, because after a while he stopped the car and said we was gonna have to go back to Waco. I told him I wadn't gonna go back to no Waco before I'd been to Nashville, so I hitchhiked the rest of the way. All that last part happened in Benton, Arkansas." He pounded the pavement for the first week, getting nowhere ("Ever one o' my toes was blistered"), and then ran into a pair of songwriters, Dale and Leroy, who invited him to share their pad until he got a break.

"The fifty bucks is just about gone," he was saying.

"Having any luck?"

"Thangs has started to break a little lately. They cut some

demos on a couple of my songs this week. Monday, Audrey Williams, that's Hank's widow, she's gonna listen to some more of 'em. Here, I'll show you a couple."

He fumbled around in his coat pocket and fished out several sheets of crumpled-up sidepunch notebook paper. On the pages he had scribbled the lyrics to several songs. One of them was called "Send My Daddy Home," about a little girl who wants nothing for Christmas except her father back home from Vietnam. Another was "Vision in Prison," about "a guy kinda getting his life straightened out with God" before getting it messed up by a hangman. He read the words with his lips, then folded the sheets of paper and stuffed them back into his pocket. He was quiet for a few minutes, but then he put both elbows on the table and frowned and said, "Tell you what's gonna happen. I got it figured out. I'm gonna stick around until I find out whether I can write songs. And if it turns out I can't, then I'm gonna find out why I can't. I got a feel for it. I ain't gonna quit. Nossir, I ain't gonna . . ."

"Damn men that can't hold their liquor," Tootsie was screaming. She had flown out from behind the counter and was flapping her arms, like a chicken on a Junebug, over a hopeless drunk in a wool hat and an Army-surplus overcoat who was heaving back and forth in a courageous effort to stay on the bar stool. "But Toot—" the drunk would start to say, and Tootsie would cut him off with, "Don't 'but-Tootsie' me, buster, just get out. Out, out, out." And here was Tootsie Bess, this tiny woman in a print dress and glasses with diamond-flecked rims, here was Tootsie yelling for Charlene to open the door, and Tootsie pulling the old man right off the bar stool and in one great heave rolling him out onto the sidewalk like a sack of dirty laundry. She stood over the man long enough to pass a benediction over him and then stormed back inside, wiping her hands on the apron at her waist, acknowledging the cheers from the crowd.

Finally a voice boomed out from a back booth: "Hell, Tootsie, you shouldn't a-done that."

"You want some of the same?" she yelled.

"Naw, I just mean you shouldn't a-done it."

"Shouldn't a-done it, hell, he was drunk."

"Yeah, Tootsie, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Hell, maybe he writes songs."

That did it. A grin spread across Tootsie's face like sunrise on the Mississippi, and in a second she was howling along with everybody else in the place. Everybody except Tommy Higgins, who cleared his throat and left a dime on the table for Charlene and stepped out into the cold night air for the long walk home. Wherever home was.

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MUSIC CITY, U.S.A.

> I don't care much for that kind of music. But one time we were on a trip and stopped at a place to eat in Indiana, and when they found out we were from Nashville they treated us like celebrities. All they could talk about was the Opry. I'm going to have to go see it one day.
>
> —A CITIZEN OF NASHVILLE, TENN.

It would take a good man all day to travel by car between the most distant points in the State of Tennessee, and even then he would have to take his meals and a relief driver and a hefty supply of No-Doz with him. "Three 'States' of Tennessee," bleats a state promotional brochure, and anybody who has attempted that 600-mile haul from Memphis on the banks of the Mississippi River to Bristol on the high Virginia border would understand immediately. Few states have such a varied face as Tennessee, last stop before the Deep South, looking, on the road maps, like a cockeyed mountain cabin listing heavily to the right. To the east (where natives are always quick to specify they are "from *East* Tennessee") are the highest peaks in eastern North America, the tired old

Appalachians, the land of TVA and hillbillies and rhododendron and moonshine whiskey and national parks and new ski resorts and the big atomic plant at Oak Ridge. At the opposite end of the state is the flat, steaming delta country that feeds off the big river: prolific soil and Beale Street and latticework and endless cotton fields and magnolia-and-lace and black people from the barren flatlands of Mississippi and Arkansas looking for work in Memphis. And in between, as distinct from the two extreme corners of the state as they are from each other, there is Middle Tennessee, where the highways begin to flatten out for the run toward the Mississippi, undulating past Tennessee walking horses and the Jack Daniel's bourbon distillery and cedar-lined country lanes and orderly farms and nursery-rhyme hills that blip across the horizon as if a child had scrawled them with a crayon.

It is in the heart of Middle Tennessee, and in the virtual center of the state, that the capital city, Nashville, squats on the red banks of the Cumberland River like a frog about to jump. Nashville ("200 miles southeast of the center of population of the United States") is an old town, the way Southerners measure them, founded in 1779 by a band of pioneers who came into what was then North Carolina territory and knocked down the trees and put up a log stockade on the west bank of the Cumberland. Over the years the town grew into the only city of appreciable size between Memphis to the west (206 miles away), Knoxville to the east (178), Louisville, Ky., to the north (179) and Chattanooga to the south (123), booming itself as the "Commercial Capital of the Central South" (banking and insurance are the big businesses), and becoming Big Daddy to a retail trading area of a million and a half people. Today, then, Nashville holds nearly 500,000 people, most of them transplants from the outlying regions of Middle Tennessee who have come in to work in Nashville's medium-sized industries: religious print-

ing, automobile glass, shoes, chemicals, textiles, and so on. The city is progressive enough (it established one of the first workable "metro" governments in the U.S.), suffers the usual growing pains (blacks have been complaining about Interstate Highways isolating their neighborhoods) and likes to talk about its "respectable" institutions: 14 colleges and universities (eight of them religious-oriented), a good symphony orchestra, the Belle Meade Country Club, neat lily-white subdivisions in all directions, the Iroquois Steeplechase, and a handful of graceful architectural pieces such as the Parthenon (a replica of the Athenian temple) and The Hermitage (Andrew Jackson's old plantation on the edge of town). "Because of its many buildings of classic design, its interest in the arts and in education," explains a Chamber of Commerce flyer, "Nashville is known as the Athens of the South."

Well, all right. No argument. But a funny thing happened on the way to the symphony. Ever since 1925 Nashville had hosted WSM radio's Grand Ole Opry: the oldest continuing radio show in America, a five-hour procession of fiddlers and country comedians and yodelers and cloggers that every Saturday night drew a few thousand visitors to a hulking old downtown tabernacle called Ryman Auditorium and was broadcast all the way to Canada. It was fashionable for a Nashvillian to say he had never been to the Opry; a play or the symphony, by all means, or maybe even to Sulphur Dell to see the minor-league Nashville Vols play baseball, but never to the Opry. It was, after all, "hillbilly music," and it was considered poor form for a leading citizen of the Athens of the South to admit he enjoyed such goings-on. Anyway, after World War II, small recording studios began popping up here and there to accommodate the colony of country musicians and writers living in or around Nashville to be near the Opry. Then somebody else opened up a sheet-music publishing house. Finally, by the early Fifties, all of the makings of a recording complex were there: publishing

houses, competing record-pressing plants, talent agencies, clothiers specializing in show costumes, shops selling guitars and other musical instruments, and even boardinghouses catering to hungry young men fresh in from the country to try their luck at writing and singing country songs. The Opry was getting so big, they added a shortened Friday-night version and started thinking about split sessions on Saturday nights. And the recording business had blossomed into a full-blown industry, adding first $30 million, then $50 million and finally $60 million a year to the Nashville economy. Like it or not, the business-minded Founding Fathers had to agree to still another subtitle: "Music City, U.S.A."

Suddenly, old Nashville has become the second-largest recording center in the world, only a step behind New York. Scheduling their first recording session at 10 A.M. and finishing their last one of the day at one o'clock the next morning, the city's 40 studios (five years ago there were only ten) produce more 45 r.p.m. or "single" records than any city in the world. In Nashville there are more than 1,500 union musicians and an equal number of songwriters, served by 29 talent agencies, seven record-pressing plants, 400 music-publishing houses, 53 record companies, offices for three performing-rights organizations, and seven trade papers. As a clue to what music means to Nashville, the city's largest annual convention is not a gathering of insurance or banking executives but the Opry Anniversary Celebration (known to anybody who has been there as the Deejay Convention): an explosive week each mid-October when some 6,000 disc jockeys, performers and anybody who *is* anybody in country music come to town to drink, play golf, interview each other and raise general hell.

When you say "music industry" in Nashville you mean country music, of course, even though Columbia Records does 10 percent of its pop recording there and such non-country stars as Connie Francis, Al Hirt, Perry Como, Patti

Page and even Bob Dylan and Buffy Sainte-Marie occasionally come to town in search of what is vaguely called "the Nashville Sound." Nashville is and always has been the spiritual home of country music, "hillbilly heaven," a fact properly noted in more than one country song ("Golden Guitar," for example, is about a blind performer killed by a train en route to his debut on the Opry), and it is never so evident as on a warm weekend, when the crowds pour into town for the Friday- and Saturday-night Opry performances—coming in from an average of 500 miles away by every means imaginable, living out of campers in downtown parking lots, strolling up and down Opry Place and Broadway in their Western clothes, nosing through the souvenir and record shops, having a beer at Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, taking one of the tour buses from the Opry House so they can see Music Row and Hank Williams' old home ("That 1952 Cadillac in the driveway is the one Hank died in on January 1, 1953") and the Biltmore Courts Motel ("Right there's where Don Gibson wrote 'Oh, Lonesome Me'"), and finally squatting on the curb in front of the ugly red-brick Grand Ole Opry House three hours before the doors open, sitting there emptying a box of Minnie Pearl's Fried Chicken and trying to figure out a way to get in for a show that was sold out seven weeks in advance. "When I die," says the old guitar picker, "I'm going to Nashville."

Begrudgingly, not relishing a single minute of it, the other Nashville has given up the trenches and raised the white flag, if only to half-staff. "Sure, I *love* country music," goes the typical comment. "It isn't every day you can pick up an industry like that." As the Sixties came to an end, country music meant nearly $100 million a year to Nashville's economy, not to mention the international publicity the industry was bringing to the town. So many of the stars were sinking their money into fast-food franchises (Minnie Pearl's Fried Chicken, Tennessee Ernie Steak 'n' Biscuits, Tex Ritter's

Chuck Wagon System) that some people were touting Nashville as the franchise center of the nation. The city put up signs at the city limits saying WELCOME TO MUSIC CITY U.S.A. and decorated the airport lounge in a country-music motif and changed the name of Fifth Avenue North, along the block where the Opry House sits, to Opry Place. Vanderbilt University, in an expression of academic neutrality, announced a course in entertainment law when Jeannie C. Riley was hauled into court in a dispute over rights to "Harper Valley PTA." The state in 1965 adopted "Tennessee Waltz" as its official song, and represented itself in Richard Nixon's inaugural parade with a $15,000 float honoring country music, featuring Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs in the flesh. But even when the city does promote its best-known business it proceeds with the brakes on: in the blue pages of the Greater Nashville Telephone Directory, for example, the last item under "Points of Interest" contains 100 words describing the Grand Ole Opry as a "folk music program." Indeed, most promotional material on the Opry and the music industry in general is cranked out by WSM (National Life & Accident Insurance Company's voice, the daddy of the Opry) or the Country Music Association.

Four blocks up the hill from the Opry House is the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, a glassy modern building on Union Street. The manager of the Conventions and Visitors Division is Bill Hartnett, a thin, floppy-eared man who wears glasses and a bow tie and likes to talk about the time he got to go to the airport to meet Paul Harvey ("a real down-to-earth guy, just like you or me"). Hartnett, who professes to be a fan of country music, is caught in the middle between the two Nashvilles even when he goes home. "I've been in this town for eighteen years and I've seen the Opry from behind the stage, out front and underneath," he was saying one bitter winter day as low snow-clouds hugged the top of the new 30-story Life & Casualty Tower. "I like it, but

my wife is a conservatory-trained pianist and she loves the symphony. Now. Let's say we've got ten friends in town for the weekend and I suggest we feed 'em, drink 'em and then take 'em to the Opry. Well, the first thing she'll say is that she's just lined up a bridge game, and then she'll say she just broke a leg. Okay, maybe a week later I tell her I've got two tickets to the Nashville Symphony and suggest that we go out, just the two of us. You know how you've got to do the wives now and then. Well, sir, you know what she'll say to that? She'll say, 'Is that *Eddy Arnold* going to be there?' And if he is, she won't go. You've got these people in town who wear tuxedoes and go to the symphony, and they just don't care for the country-music crowd or the music. It's my guess that no more than half the civilian population of Nashville has ever been to the Opry." But nobody knows better than Bill Hartnett what put Nashville on the map, because he lives with it every day. His office received a total of 8,800 inquiries by mail during 1968, and three out of every five dealt with country music. "They wanted to know how to get into the Opry and 'What is the Country Music Hall of Fame?' and 'Do they really walk the streets with guitars over their shoulders?' The thing is, when you get outside Nashville or Tennessee, that's about all anybody knows about us. In this 200-mile radius around Nashville there are two million people, and beyond that perimeter is where the country stars go to put on their shows because there are a lot of people in that perimeter who couldn't care less about hearing somebody pick a guitar."

Hartnett answered a call from somebody wanting to know something about a Vanderbilt basketball game ("Tell you what, why don't you call the sports publicity office over at the school?"), then sank back in his chair and laughed to himself. "I saw a guy one day, looked like he was about twenty-seven, standing in the main room at the Third National Bank. Had on overalls and dirty shoes and a wool hat

pushed back on his head, and he was pulling these rolled-up scraps of paper out of his pockets and handing 'em to one of the directors of the bank." He stood up to demonstrate. "Funniest thing you ever saw. He'd reach in up here and fish one out, then he'd go to his back pocket, then he'd find another one in a side pocket. When he got through, he flattened 'em out one at a time and put an *X* on the back of each one. Must've taken him ten minutes just to do all of that. Then he went over to a window and gave all of those scraps of paper to a teller, shook hands with this bank director, and left. I'd been watching everything, so I went over to the director and asked him what the devil was going on. 'Oh,' he said, 'that's a musician. Been on the road about eight weeks, and those were the checks he got for singing.' I said, 'Do you mind telling me how much he deposited?' And do you know what he said? 'Thirty-five thousand dollars.' "

This is the kind of story Nashvillians like to use when they are talking about the impact of country music on their city, but Hartnett feels there has been a subtle change in attitude. "I do believe we're going through a revolution," he puts it. "For one thing, the ones who're coming along now (in country music) are a lot smarter than they used to be. Oh, sure, we still have these characters who come in with five bucks in their pocket, and they're gonna go down to Sixteenth Avenue to make their first million, but they wind up hungry and living at the Union Mission after a few days. I mean, you can look at Jeannie C. Riley and see it's still possible to make it overnight like that. But most of the new stars are different, went to college and got good sense and all, and the first-family people notice that. And another thing, the top people are becoming more acutely aware of what country music means to Nashville. If the music industry left town today, can you imagine what it'd do to this place?"

That's what the gang on Music Row *thought* they were saying uptown: We don't like *you*, but your money's good.

The gap isn't as wide now as it was in the Forties when Roy Acuff got so mad at a governor for saying he was "disgracing the state by making Nashville the hillbilly capital of the world" that he ran for governor (getting roundly defeated but singing a lot of songs in the process). The gap is still there, however, and most of the country-music people react to it by withdrawing into a close-knit community of their own. They live in the same subdivisions, party together, marry their own, take care of their own (with the Opry Trust Fund, which goes to those down on their luck), come down with lockjaw when an outsider noses around looking for dirt on a colleague, and generally stay out of the mainstream of Nashville life except when they feel like buying a piece of it. Nashville has its personal rivalries and petty jealousies, of course, but the need to stand together against the enemy from without has kept infighting to a minimum. With some bitterness, as though it were the only thing you have to know about how Nashville treats its country musicians, they like to talk about what happened to a sharp young singer-writer-publisher named Jim Glaser during a cocktail party connected with the Deejay Convention. "Everybody was there," says Bob Woltering, editor of a monthly country-music tabloid called *Music City News*, "and when somebody introduced one of those First Family ladies to Glaser she said, 'Oh, I've always wanted to meet one of *y'all.*' Jim was so mad he looked right over her shoulder and walked away. Just left her standing there with a drink in her hand and egg on her face." Presumably he couldn't get back to his own turf, Music Row, fast enough.

Music Row (or, sometimes, Record Row) is the local name for an eight-square-block area about two miles from downtown, in the urban renewal area around Sixteenth and Seventeenth Avenues South, near Vanderbilt University and a vast Negro section, where almost all of Nashville's music-

related businesses operate out of a smorgasbord of renovated old single- and two-story houses and sleek new office buildings. Music Row is, then, the very heartbeat of the entire country music industry: where RCA Victor does *all* of its country recording, where Decca and Columbia Records do better than 90 percent of theirs, and where a sizable majority of the nation's country talent agencies and publishing houses are based. ("There's so damn much of this drop-in visiting around there that you can't get your work done," complains one independent producer who refuses to move to The Row, but he is a rarity.) At the head of The Row is the modernistic $750,000 building opened in the spring of 1967 by the Country Music Association to house the CMA executive offices and the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, where more than 100,000 fans a year come to see the bronze plaques honoring members of the Hall of Fame and a collection of artifacts such as the cigarette lighter carried by singer Patsy Cline when she died in a plane crash (it is decorated with a Confederate flag design and still plays "Dixie" when opened). Next door is the fiercely dignified dark-brick headquarters of Broadcast Music, Inc., country music's ASCAP, and it is poetic that BMI and the CMA would stand shoulder to shoulder at the top of Music Row, like twin Statues of Liberty, because not until BMI was formed in 1939 did it become possible for country songwriters to make a decent living. Beyond these two structures, Music Row isn't anything worth taking pictures of except for the three-story sand-colored RCA Victor studios and the more modest Decca, Capitol and Columbia buildings. The rest of The Row is a montage of FOR SALE signs, old houses done up with false fronts to look like office buildings, leggy secretaries swishing down the sidewalks, dusty Cadillacs parked close to the buildings as though they were stray dogs hiding under houses in the mid-August heat, Johnny Cash sneaking into a studio back door with his shades on, and now and then a bus sitting

in an alley while it is loaded up for a month's worth of one-nighters, its sides decorated with HANK WILLIAMS JR. AND THE CHEATIN' HEARTS. The first inclination is to reckon that everybody on Music Row is too busy making money to worry about the neighborhood ("They call it a dream town because nobody gets any sleep"), but the fact is that they are simply waiting on the city of Nashville. "Our biggest drawback is the little black cloud the city put over our head when they said they were going to put a boulevard through Sixteenth Avenue," says Mrs. Frances Preston of BMI, "[because] so far, nothing has happened." When the city announced elaborate plans some five years ago for Music City Boulevard, land values on Music Row boomed overnight: one corner lot on Seventeenth sold for $39,000 in January of 1965 and the buyer turned down $160,000 for it the following January; a 50-foot lot could be had for $15,000 in '61 but was priced at $80,000 five years later. Every month, it seems, there is a story in *Music City News* or *Billboard* about another new building along The Row: Monument Records Opens New Studio Featuring 16-Track Stereo, Decca to Build $3 Million Complex in Nashville, Groundbreaking Ceremonies Set for New ASCAP Complex. The movers along Music Row are ready whenever the city is, and they see the proposed Music City Boulevard as not only a better place to work but also as a classy showcase for country music: direct access via expressway exit ramps, trees and shrubbery decorating an island down the middle of the boulevard, service roads running beside the boulevard, and a 12-story $4 million office-and-apartment building as the major landmark (it took only 30 minutes to explain the proposition and raise the initial $200,000 in stock required to get the project moving). Coupled with the plans for a 400-acre Disneyland-type development on the edge of town called "Opryland, U.S.A.," featuring Western haberdasheries and a new air-conditioned swivel-seat auditorium for the Grand Ole Opry, this is get-

ting country music out of Tootsie's Orchid Lounge in a hurry. Which is totally in character for this whirlwind romance between Nashville and country music: the first music-publishing house in Nashville was formed little more than two decades ago and today there are 400. Whirlwind romance? They didn't even bother to take a blood test.

At the root of it all, of course, is the Grand Ole Opry. The Opry began one night in 1925 when an old mountain fiddler named Uncle Jimmy Thompson sat in front of a carbon microphone at the studios of WSM and sawed away until they made him quit 65 minutes later. WSM ("We Shield Millions") had been started by the National Life & Accident Insurance Company as a means of selling insurance policies. Anyway, in a couple of years the weekly mountain-music show had been christened Grand Ole Opry, and country musicians began scrambling to get on the air even if they had to play for free. It didn't take long for the Opry to become as traditional as *The Saturday Evening Post* in rural America, and soon people who had been listening to it every Saturday night over clear-channel 50,000-watt WSM were saving up for the day they would be able to travel all the way to Nashville and see the Opry in person. As the Opry grew, so did the family of country singers and pickers who had moved to Nashville to be where the action was. These were hard times for country musicians. They were regarded as "hillbillies" by most of the rest of the country, and they had to play medicine shows and carnivals and county fairs during the week and then hustle back into Nashville for the Opry on Saturday night. Most of the recording in those days was done by remote crews who would come down from New York with portable equipment and spend a few days scouring the hills for untapped talent or recording such early Opry performers as Uncle Dave Macon and the Carter Family and Roy Acuff. It was either that or have them come to New York, which the

stars like Eddy Arnold and Ernest Tubb and Acuff were doing in the Forties, when the record companies suddenly realized the raw potential in country music and established a beachhead in Nashville.

Any historian looking for a peg for the rise of country music in Nashville always winds up by pointing to the formation of Acuff-Rose Publications, Inc., the first one in town, in 1943. Roy Acuff had come out of the East Tennessee hills to join the Opry in 1938 and had become the show's first big singing star with such standards as "Wabash Cannonball" and "Great Speckled Bird." He had put away some $25,000 by playing road shows and the Opry and selling songbooks here and there, and he was looking around for something to do with his money. Working live radio shows for WSM at that time was a pop songwriter from Chicago named Fred Rose, who had written "Be Honest with Me" and "Tweedle-O-Twill" and "Red Hot Mama," among others, and when Acuff and Rose got together they decided to form a publishing company that would lean heavily toward country music. Even then, pop stars like Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters were beginning to hit with smoothed-over country songs ("Sioux City Sue," "You Are My Sunshine," "Pistol Packin' Mama"), moving *Billboard* to say in 1943 that country music "has shown by its work against adverse conditions that when the war is over and normalcy returns it will be the field to watch," which in turn got Nashville off its haunches. In 1945, Decca put a man named Paul Cohen in charge of its country operations and Cohen recorded Red Foley that year in Studio B at WSM, which was the early pace-setter in Nashville as far as country music was concerned. Then a man named George Reynolds and two WSM engineers, Aaron Shelton and Carl Jenkins, opened a recording studio on the top floor of the Tulane Hotel ("Castle Studio," for WSM's nickname as "Air Castle of the South") and began recording people like Ernest Tubb and Kitty Wells and Foley. "Ernest Tubb was a

big seller for Decca and was selling as many as Bing Crosby," says Owen Bradley, a pop pianist then (he arranged the session for Foley's big "Chattanooga Shoeshine Boy"), now in charge of Decca's country recordings out of Nashville. In the late Forties and early Fifties, the pace quickened overnight. Francis Craig recorded "Near You" there, and the big bands of Ray Anthony and Woody Herman came to town for sessions (at creaky old Ryman Auditorium, home of the Opry, of all places, where they were able to get a natural echo effect). Bradley went on from Castle Studio to build his own place on Sixteenth Avenue South, in an old Quonset hut which is still being used by Columbia Records. By 1960, less than 15 years after the first recording studio had been built, most of the major recording companies were doing all of their country recording in Nashville, and by 1963 Nashville had arrived as "hillbilly heaven": 10 studios, 10 talent agencies, four record-pressing plants, 26 record companies, nearly 2,000 musicians and writers. Nashville had survived Elvis and rock 'n' roll, radio stations were going country every day, record companies were moving hot young producers into town from the West Coast, Bob Dylan was cutting the Nashville Sound, and they even had drums and electric guitars onstage at the Opry. Where are you, Uncle Jimmy Thompson, now that we need you?

The upshot of it all, Music Row, bears no resemblance whatsoever to the days of the Castle Studio and medicine shows and portable recording equipment. The streamlined offices of Acuff-Rose Publications (God bless "Tennessee Waltz" and Hank Williams), away from The Row on Franklin Road, house a studio and a talent agency and a rock 'n' roll label and even a printing shop (all of it run by Howdy Forrester, Roy Acuff's fiddler). The latest word in engineering in 1957 was three-track tape, but now anything less than

eight-track is considered quaint, and the newest studios are putting in 16-track ("That's for people who aren't sure *what* they want to do," sniffs Owen Bradley). The Country Music Association is there to give a personal manager, in a minute, a list of the names of every important country radio station and disc jockey in the nation. The raw young singers who come in from the country and manage to land a talent contract are immediately dispatched to Jo Coulter Studio to learn how to walk and put on their makeup for television. The talent agencies are typified by Hubert Long International: Long, forty-six and a well-tanned bachelor ("It's the only office building in town where the secretaries are coming in instead of going out at five o'clock," they say), came out of Poteet, Texas, and hacked away promoting people like Kitty Wells and Webb Pierce for years, now books people all over the world, has 25 writers under Moss Rose Publications, has opened a West Coast branch, has his hands on 13 publishing companies. The big status symbol seems to be these push-button telephones that save the picking finger from dialing, and the next status symbol may be automobile telephones (singer Bill Anderson is considering putting one in his $50,000 bus so he can make public-relations calls to disc jockeys while he zips through, say, Charlotte, en route to a one-nighter). Now, instead of old boys like Stonewall Jackson stalking the streets as though they were stepping over furrows, you have sharp cats from California wearing bush jackets and long hair, using expressions like "That's squirrelly, man, that warps my brain," saying bad stuff about how Roy Acuff yo-yo's onstage at the Opry because when he finishes "Wabash Cannonball" he doesn't know what else to do, refusing to go to the Opry anyway, raving about Glen Campbell's latest album, almost busting their blue jeans when they get all-country WENO on the car radio: "For your information, *WENO* has *news* for *you!!!*"

Shelby Singleton, that's the ticket now. Ol' Shelby, sitting out there on Belmont Boulevard, a good two miles away from The Row, doing his thing: getting pudgy, letting his hair grow out, having his picture made with Jeannie C. Riley, counting money, wheeling and dealing, hiring an extra secretary every week, expanding SSS International's offices in that old converted house faster than the carpenters can keep up. Singleton was a vice president at Mercury Records for seven years, shuttling back and forth between Nashville and New York, recording artists like Patti Page and Brook Benton, until he quit in December of 1967 to start a production company of his own in Nashville. Recording everything from country to rhythm-and-blues, he started making money right off the bat when the black R&B duo of Peggy Scott and Jo Jo Benson sold 900,000 copies of their first single produced by Shelby Singleton Productions, Inc. But 900,000 singles was nothing, in retrospect. One month after Singleton had gone into business for himself he listened to a demonstration record of a girl named Alice Joy singing a song called "Harper Valley PTA," a real gut-country "story" song about small-town hanky-panky. Singleton was mildly interested in the song but felt that Miss Joy wasn't the right lady to record it and so he waited. Six months later the program director at WENO radio asked Singleton to listen to a demonstration tape of a singer he was managing: Jean Riley, a little country girl from Anson, Texas, who was married to a Gallatin Road Texaco service-station operator and had been working for peanuts as a secretary on Music Row for two years, waiting for a break. There were some frantic negotiations over rights to Jean Riley and "Harper Valley," but the minute they were settled Singleton told Jean (Jeannie C. Riley by now) that he was going to make her a star. They recorded "Harper Valley PTA" on a Friday night and released it the following Monday—

This is just a little Peyton Place,
And you're all Harper Valley hypocrites . . .

—and when everybody stopped howling at the absurdity of the lyrics and the incredible twang of Jeannie C. Riley, they got down to some serious buying. "Harper Valley" zoomed to the top of the charts and within six months it had sold 4,800,000 singles and was a Gold Record in the United States, Australia and Canada. Jean Riley's humdrum life had done a neck-snapping about-face: she quit her job (so did her husband, Mickey, to become her personal manager), began guesting on the big television shows, bought a purple Cadillac and a lot of clothes, went off to a charm school on the West Coast to learn how to walk and talk and handle herself onstage, and it wasn't long before she was riding down the main drag of Anson, Texas, on Jeannie C. Riley Day.

As for Shelby S. Singleton, his faith in the Great American Dream had been reaffirmed. The money was rolling in. Yes, Jeannie was a lovely young artist who treated him as though he were her father. He opened a movie company, its first film to be a 90-minute feature, "sort of like a country-music version of *The Graduate,*" the voice of Jeannie C. Riley doing "Harper Valley PTA" on the soundtrack. The walls of his cramped office in the old house on Belmont Boulevard in Nashville became covered with framed gold records and pictures of him and Jeannie C., and it was in this office that he began to receive the world's press.

"What can I do for you?" Singleton was saying late one afternoon, almost a year to the day since he had first heard the demonstration record of Alice Joy's "Harper Valley" version. He stood behind a desk piled high with 45 r.p.m. records and unopened mail and publicity photographs and memos to himself, a chubby little man in sea-blue beltless slacks and a horizontal-striped crewneck short-sleeve shirt,

sorting the latest mail like a Vegas gambler dealing cards—*one for Jeannie, one for me, one for Jeannie, one for . . .* and it was absolutely beautiful, the way he never once interrupted his work.

"Tell me about Jeannie and 'Harper Valley,' " he was told.

"You say you're doing a book on us?" he said.

"No. Country music in general."

"Oh." *One for Jeannie, one for me, another for Jeannie.*

"But you and Jeannie have a place in it."

"*I'd* say so."

"Where is she right now?"

Jeannie, me, Jeannie, Jeannie, me. "L.A. Putting an act together at a choreography school. Hollywood Palace on the eighteenth, Joey Bishop the twenty-eighth, Glen Campbell February fifth—" *one for me*—"main room at the Flamingo in Vegas on February sixth." *One for Jeannie.*

"You think she has staying power? Some people think . . ."

"Jeannie's a very talented young girl."

"Some people think she just had the right song, and . . ."

"If she's guided well enough, she can be a big star."

The phone. New York. Singleton held the receiver in a vise between his shoulder and his jaw so his hands would be free to keep sorting the mail—*Jeannie, me, Jeannie, Jeannie*—and he said, "John? What's happening, baby? It's about time. Where the hell you been? It's gonna be bigger than 'Harper Valley.' Shit, you order like you were in Grand Rapids. Okay, yeah, hell, I'll give you a *thousand* copies if you'll just get off your ass and push it. Okay. Sell, John. Hang loose, baby." *One for Jeannie, one for me.*

"Well, I'll get out of your way . . ."

"Okay, sport." *One for Jeannie.* "When's this book?"

"I don't know. January, maybe."

"Look, be sure you put in there—" *one for me, one for*—"be sure you say I had thirty-nine Gold Records before I'd

ever seen Jeannie C. Riley. I've had bigger acts than Jeannie, but nobody believes it. Tuesday I'm producing a country-pop novelty, Wednesday an R&B novelty, Thursday a bubblegum, Friday it's a folk-rock with Connie Francis. Get that in there somewhere—" *me, Jeannie, Jeannie, me*—"okay?"

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A&R SESSION WITH CHET ATKINS

> Though Chet Atkins calls himself "just another hunched-over guitar player," this 44-year-old native of rural Tennessee is probably the most influential music man in Music City.
>
> —*Harper's* MAGAZINE, JULY 1968

It was mid-morning already, but only now were the first signs of life beginning to come to Music Row. In Columbia Records' Studio B, nearly a dozen sidemen stood around tuning their instruments while the twenty-year-old son of Hank Williams perched on a stool and began rehearsing the last songs left behind by his father. Next door, in the Capitol Records building, superstar Bill Anderson's secretary began opening that day's stack of 100 fan letters while his personal manager got on the phone to a disc jockey in Altoona to remind him that Anderson and the Po' Boys were on their way. In the alley behind these two buildings a small crowd milled around singer George Jones's new $75,000 customized bus while Jones's band members loaded the hold for a maiden

voyage. Elsewhere, a fading one-time star was stumbling in from wherever he had spent the night, smelling like a brewery, gargling with Scope in the men's room across the hall from his office, about to find out he had lost another secretary.

At ten o'clock sharp, a Cadillac eased into the parking lot behind the sand-colored three-story RCA Victor building a block away on Seventeenth Avenue South. Out of it came a stringy, unobtrusive East Tennesseean in a soft royal-blue blazer and a polka-dot tie. He locked the car and quietly slipped into the building through a back door, shyly nodding to the people who gawked at him in the hall, and before he had a chance to take off his coat or even sit down in his office he took a call from a friend in Paterson, N.J., wanting advice about a scheme to sell guitar lessons through the mail. Chet Atkins was just hanging up when a songwriter named Lawton Williams poked his head in the doorway.

"Got a minute?" Williams said.

"Sure," said Atkins, lighting the stub of a cigar.

"I wanted you to hear this tape."

"Which one?"

" 'Everything's OK on the LBJ.' "

Atkins took the tape and threaded it onto the machine beside his desk. Lawton Williams wrote "Fraulein" and "Geisha Girl," among other hits, but lately he had been on a kick of writing flip-side novelty songs. The latest was a second song he had written about Lyndon Johnson, who now had only a few days left in office. It told about Johnson leaving Washington in a black limousine for the long ride home to the LBJ Ranch in Texas. En route, the song says, he stops over in Nashville "to hear Chet Atkins play." When the tape had run out, Atkins took it off the machine and handed it back to Williams.

"What do you think?" Williams said.

"What'll *Lyndon* think?" said Atkins.

"He liked the other one. He likes things like that. Any suggestions?"

"That part about me . . ."

"You like that okay?"

"I don't know, Lawton, it's, well, it's *embarrassing.*"

"Well, he *does* like you."

"Yeah, but when you *say* it . . ."

"You're too modest, Chester."

"All right," Atkins said. "It still embarrasses me, but you know what you're doing. I go to Dallas next week, and I hope I don't run into Lyndon." He winked at Williams. "It's good. Go ahead."

Time slips away. It seems like only yesterday that a jaunty but relaxed guitar playing a tune called "Country Gentleman" began haunting the country and propelled an angular young man from the Clinch Mountains of Tennessee into a position as one of the world's best guitarists. Chet Atkins had come out of whistle-stop Luttrell, Tenn., about 20 miles north of Knoxville, and learned to play the fiddle and the guitar from his father, a classical musician and singer, and from his grandfather, who played and "built" fiddles in the tradition of the Appalachian mountains. He spent a long and hard apprenticeship, working radio stations all the way from Knoxville to Denver, and wasn't "discovered" until 1947, when he was twenty-three years old and out of work, by Steve Sholes, then a vice-president for Victor. Sholes heard Atkins' guitar on a commercial, the story goes, and sent out scouts to get him. Ten years later, after doing his hitch on the Grand Ole Opry and making a name for himself with records, Atkins was named to head up the Victor operation in Nashville.

Atkins took over in 1957, when country music (all music, in fact) was buckling under the throbbing onslaught of rock 'n' roll. Hank Williams was gone, Elvis Presley had come,

and all of a sudden the tried-and-true "hard-country" formula wasn't an automatic winner any more. Sales of country records were down. Country radio stations were making the switch to rock 'n' roll. It was time for experimentation and change, and few people were more prepared to guide Nashville through its most trying period than Chet Atkins, who had the back-country roots of all the great country musicians but had gone a giant step further by developing interests in such diverse areas as poetry, classical music, philosophy and electronics. Atkins, in short, was not simply a "picker," but a master musician who was no more at home on the stage of the Opry than he was guesting with the Nashville Symphony or playing at the White House (as he would do, for John Kennedy, in 1961). Forever experimenting with new electronic methods and new instruments to create fresh sounds, Atkins quietly pulled country music out of a rut and kept pace with the new technology and changing tastes, and in the mid-Sixties when the phrase, "the Nashville Sound," was coined, it amounted to a tribute to him. The Nashville Sound is the loose, relaxed, improvised feeling found on almost anything recorded out of Nashville today, and if any one man could be credited with creating it, the man would be Chet Atkins.

It has made Atkins the most respected musician on Music Row today. As chief of A&R (artists and repertoire) for Victor in Nashville, he is directly responsible for bringing together the right artist and the right song and then seeing that the best possible recording is made. He personally produces three or four recording sessions each week, sometimes doubling up between the control room and the studio floor ("laying down some Chet Atkins licks" on the guitar, they call it), and the list of young Nashville artists who credit him with kicking off their career is endless. In spite of his time-consuming duties at Victor, Atkins' first love is his guitar. "This other stuff is just a hobby," he insists. "I'm a guitar

player." Nobody seems to know where he finds the time, but he still manages to record his own albums (often taking a rhythm track home at night and putting his guitar track over it in a studio he built "to putter around in") and to play some 20 big-city concerts a year on a special package put together by himself and friends Floyd Cramer, Boots Randolph and Jerry Reed: "The Masters Festival of Music." One night in 1968, when he showed up backstage at the Opry after an absence of several years, he was virtually forced on stage with a guitar, and the crowd nearly tore the old house down when he stopped playing.

To his closest friends (and that inner circle includes an impressive array of other musical innovators such as Randolph, Cramer, Al Hirt, Pete Fountain and Arthur Fiedler of the Boston Pops Orchestra), he is known as Chester, an icy-veined, wry-humored, conservatively dressed refugee from the mountains with pale-blue eyes and high Cherokee cheekbones and the demeanor of a contented small-town undertaker. Investments in real estate and stocks have made him one of the wealthiest men on Music Row, yet his wife cuts his hair. His favorite story about himself goes back to the time he and songwriter John D. Loudermilk took their wives on a slow cruise through the Caribbean: "We got to singing and playing one night, and the next day one of the people who'd been sitting around listening came up to me and said, 'Say, you sure can play that guitar.' I thanked him, and then he said, 'I'll tell you one thing, though, you ain't no Chet Atkins.'"

During the conversation with Lawton Williams, singer Stu Phillips and an arranger named Bill Walker had come in and taken seats in Atkins' office, which is highlighted by a boomerang-shaped velvet sofa and a nude statue carved from rare Philippine wood and an ashtray engraved TO CHET—THANKS —TRINI (Trini Lopez had been in town to record an album, "Welcome to Trini Country"). Phillips, a pleasant young bal-

ladeer who had given up a big television following in his native Canada to come to Nashville, needed to record four more songs for a forthcoming album. He and Walker, an Australian who had been called in from South Africa to arrange Eddy Arnold's sessions, would spend the morning with Atkins going over material. Atkins asked his secretary to hold all of his calls for a while, then found a tape of one of the songs up for consideration. It was called "Rings of Grass" and had been written by Shel Silverstein, a writer-photographer-poet-artist who had recently (a) written a swinging folk tune called "The Unicorn," (b) gone on location at a nudist colony for a series of illustrated articles in *Playboy* Magazine and (c) so endeared himself to *Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner that he had been honored with his own apartment in the Playboy Mansion in Chicago.

"You had a chance to listen to Shel's demo, Stu?" said Atkins as he slapped the tape on the machine.

"Yes," Phillips said. "It's nice."

"Ol' Shel's probably got the worst voice of anybody alive, but I'm not knocking anybody with a deal like he's got. Can you imagine him and Hefner and thirty Bunnies in that house?"

The rasping, hoarse voice of Shel Silverstein, accompanied by his own guitar, filled the room. It *was* a good song, though, with the sad, lilting melody that Stu Phillips handles best. The three men listened to the tape, then hummed along, and finally Phillips began picking up the lyrics and singing them. Presently Atkins reached back for the guitar leaning against the wall behind his desk and began to pick as Phillips sang. "Damn," Atkins mumbled, "I broke a nail on my business finger and can't play a note." After the tape had played a second time, Atkins took it off the recorder and said, "Maybe we could use my tree cymbal at the end there."

"Your what?" said Walker.

"Tree cymbal."

"Never heard of it."

"It's shaped kinda like a Christmas tree about two feet high," Atkins said. "Got these doughnut-looking cymbals that get bigger from the top to the bottom of the pole they're on. You rake a drumstick up or down, and it makes a pretty good sound."

"Where'd you find that?" said Phillips.

"Pakistan. You can import one for about a hundred dollars. Makes a nice decorative piece."

"A hundred dollars for a decorative piece?"

"I've got mine at the house."

"You're rich, all right."

Next they discussed a couple of other songs they would do on the session, and finally Phillips sang a song he had written, a ballad called "Let the Guitars Play," while Atkins strummed the guitar with the cover to a book of safety matches ("Hey, that's a good sound there"). There was some debate about the melody ("It's a lot like 'I Might've Gone Fishing,' Stu, the old Smiley Burnette song"), but it was soon resolved (" 'Gone Fishing' is so old, nobody'd think about it"), and the conversation had circled back to offbeat percussion instruments when Atkins was interrupted by the telephone. "I don't want it," he said, then picked up the receiver.

"No, that's okay, we're about through," he said. "Did you hire those fiddles yet? I'd like to get Albert up here for it, too. . . . I know. What we really need around here is a sweet girl's voice in one of these groups. Like a Dottie West, or an Anita . . . Okay, good. I'll see you. . . ."

When Atkins had finished on the phone, Phillips and Walker were on their feet and headed out the door. The session was set for two weeks later, around the corner from Atkins' office in the Victor studio. In a way, the session that morning had said all there is to say about what has been happening in Nashville lately. Here, in a town that once belonged to Roy Acuff and Ernest Tubb and Uncle Dave

Macon and The Solemn Ole Judge, you had a suave Canadian singer and an Australian arranger and a guitar picker from the Clinch Mountains kicking around a song written by the bald and bearded philosopher-in-residence of the Playboy Mansion.

THE NASHVILLE SOUND

> Country music is no longer strictly rural, as the name implies, but has become the folk music of the working classes. . . . In many respects, country music can rightfully claim the distinction of being America's only native art form.
>
> —PRESS RELEASE FROM THE COUNTRY MUSIC ASSOCIATION

Wesley Rose, the head of Acuff-Rose Publications, Inc., the first music-publishing house in Nashville, spends a lot of his time now talking about the good old days. Rather than discussing the new things happening to country music, like pseudo-country singers doing "now country" songs on prime-time television or country songs getting air play on many pop radio stations, he prefers to sit in his lush-carpeted office on Franklin Road, a couple of miles away from Music Row, puffing on a good pipe, reminiscing about what a great raw country talent Hank Williams was or swapping stories with Roy Acuff about the simpler times of tent shows and blackface comedy and pure country music. Wesley Rose doesn't like what is happening in Nashville these days. His company

has been responsible for some of it, sure, having represented such artists as Roy Orbison, Bob Luman and Tom Jones in the past, but that is business, and apparently an entirely separate matter. Rose's heart is with country music—pure, unadulterated, nasal, gutty, *real* country music—and it is easy to understand why when you know where he came from. He was an accountant for Standard Oil in Chicago when he took over the business end of Acuff-Rose for his father, songwriter Fred Rose, who had founded the company on $25,000 of Roy Acuff's money in 1943, and he has admitted he "didn't know a thing about the music business" when he started. Then, right after World War II, he and his father discovered Hank Williams—probably the purest example of the hungry, tortured hillbilly singer in country music's history—and once the royalties on Williams' songs began rolling in there was never any doubt about the financial security of Acuff-Rose Publications. So Wesley Rose owes his allegiance to Roy Acuff ("The King of Country Music") and Hank Williams and the whole breed of classic "hillbilly" singers they represent, and it is no surprise to hear him launch a harangue about what has happened to the Nashville music business in the past 10 or 15 years: "You go to the Opry for country music, not this rock 'n' roll or rhythm-and-blues stuff they're having now. . . . Just go down to the Opry one night when Acuff's out of town and talk to some of these people who've saved their money to come and then found out Acuff won't be there; it's like going to Yankee Stadium and not getting to see Ruth or Gehrig. . . . You can't be fish *and* fowl; up in New York they say country music's on the pop charts now, but you can't be country and be on the pop charts at the same time. . . . When I'm talking to an artist or a writer about coming with us, I want to know where he was born; if he was born in New York, he'd have to have an inoculation to know country music. . . . Anybody who believes there'll be one music has lost his head. . . . If we were to become the

biggest publisher in the world, our main office would still be in Nashville because we've got an obligation to stay here. . . ."

Rose wasn't the only man in Nashville who was somewhat frustrated as the Sixties came to an end. A clear gap had developed between the traditionalists of Rose's ilk and the impatient young ones who had piled into town with little respect for the popularity Hank Snow, say, *used to* have. In a matter of only five years, Music Row had gotten away from the production of exclusively "country" music and had headed off into all sorts of directions. It was still loosely called "country music," but a lot of it wasn't. A farm boy from Billstown, Ark., named Glen Campbell, who had traveled for nearly a year with a rock 'n' roll outfit in California, was on the CBS television network every Wednesday night, and on one album ("Wichita Lineman," which did $1 million in sales the first day) sang songs written by everybody from black soul singer Otis Redding to West Coast poet Rod McKuen. Ray Price, a hillbilly in good standing, dropped the whining steel-guitar sounds and started recording with a dozen violins—not fiddles, please—in the background. One of the bright new singers was a Negro from Mississippi, Country Charley Pride, who pronounced it "I'm moving on" instead of "Ah'm moovin' awn" and kept showing up on the Lawrence Welk Show. The list of "outsiders" recording songs that had started out as country was endless: Frank and Nancy Sinatra, Dean Martin, Dinah Shore, Bob Dylan, Ann-Margret. Three of *Billboard*'s first 11 "Hot 100 Singles of 1968" were originally country tunes. And at the Grand Ole Opry, where the changes were most obvious, the once steady diet of clogging and fiddling and nasal wailing had been abandoned in favor of the times: drums, electric guitars, rock 'n' roll, turtlenecks and ruffled men's shirts. "The Nashville Sound," a phrase coined during the decade, had ceased to denote merely a country song conceived and weaned in

Nashville; now it meant craftsmanship, atmosphere, simple lyrics, "white soul," a more sophisticated approach to the same old truths about love and life and hard times and death. "Most of the people who record here have rural backgrounds," explained a Nashville songwriter named John D. Loudermilk, who wrote "Abilene" and "Language of Love," among others, and still hangs around the bus stations in Nashville when he feels like he's losing touch with *the people*. "Take me, I was raised in the country and can remember taking a bath in the kitchen with the radio on top of the icebox playing country music. Most of us have, somewhere in our background, the sound of a banjo being plucked or a fiddle being played. But we're not satisfied with three chords and bass and a steel. That's our heritage, but we want to offer a whole lot more."

The heritage Loudermilk talked about was nearly 500 years in the making, and the Nashville Sound of today is the result of the hybridization that worked on, over all of those years, what was at first a collection of simple European folk ballads. You get into a little speculation and romanticism here when you start talking about the original roots of country music, but it is generally agreed that even in the beginning it was the folks' music. "As the couriers usually reported only to the castle lord," says one essay, "the lesser nobles and townsfolk came to rely on the wandering minstrel for news from the neighboring castles. The minstrel enjoyed a limited diplomatic immunity from the plunderers and was usually able to travel boundaries without restraint. He frequently incorporated the gossip he heard into ballads which he sang from court to court. The ballads were sometimes based on castle slander ('Everything's OK on the LBJ'?), military exploits ('Are There Angels in Korea'?), or unusual occurrences ('Carroll County Accident'?). With the coming of Christianity, some of the ballads took on a moralistic tone ('It Wasn't

God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels'?)." Anyway, the Scotch-Irish settlers brought their music with them when they came, and the trail led from the British Isles to eastern Canada to New England to the Virginia and Carolina tidewaters to the Appalachian mountains. Because the people who preferred the frontier were cut off from outside influences and were conservative in nature, they tended to cling to their old music more tenaciously than the settlers who had located in the more densely populated areas (helping to explain why, even today, country music is equally popular in the South, rural New England and Canada). But it didn't take long for the music to change whenever it was exposed to a new environment. New homemade instruments (zither, guitar, banjo) created new sounds such as Bluegrass. Negro slaves in the South, the Civil War, hard religion, industrialization and the necessity to leave home to find work had their effect on a music that had always been simple and topical. Then came the westward migration into Louisiana and Texas and on toward California, and the music carried west by these settlers was influenced by the new life they faced and the people they met: the Cajun, the cowboy, the Mexican and even the touring Hawaiian musician. And the changes kept coming. Woody Guthrie sang about the migrant farm laborers, Jimmie Rodgers about the railroads and "goin' to California," the Carter Family about the virtues of toughing it out until you get to heaven, Gene Autry about the lonesome prairie. Then, finally, came the modern period: borrowing from Negro blues and spirituals and jazz, the world wars, migration into the big Northern industrial towns, Roy Acuff's paving the way for solo singing stars, Eddy Arnold's toning down of country music, Elvis Presley and rock 'n' roll, drums and electric guitars onstage at the Grand Ole Opry, the steel guitar, the use of tapes in recording studios and, most recently, the slick pop-country sounds of such stars as Glen Campbell and Chet Atkins and Roger Miller. You can sit in

the audience at the Opry on almost any Saturday night and see a cross section of nearly every American musical form pass across the worn old stage: Bluegrass from the Appalachians (Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys), honky-tonk from East Texas (George Jones), gunfighter ballads from the Mexican border (Marty Robbins), Cajun music from Louisiana (Hank Williams Jr.), Negro rock 'n' roll (Bob Luman), spirited mountain spirituals (Wilma Lee and Stoney Cooper), cowboy songs (Tex Ritter), and pop music (Leroy Van Dyke). Let the Country Music Association and the scholars talk all they want to about country music being the only pure form of American music; what they should say is, country music is the purest *hybrid* music we have in America. If it was simple and moving and earthy, country music borrowed from it. Country music is today, just as it was some 500 years ago, the folks' music.

There are as many definitions and opinions of the Nashville Sound as there are variations on it. "The Nashville Sound, if there is such a thing, is a record cut in Nashville that has that relaxed atmosphere," says Hubert Long. "Glen Campbell sounds different. Do you call that the California Sound?" Campbell himself ("I don't care whether it's country, pop or what, I just want a good song") sees a definite trend away from hard-country: "There'll always be room for a Kitty Wells or a Loretta Lynn or a George Jones, but they'd better be good. That kind of music won't sell any more unless it's good. The market is dying out, shrinking on 'em." Argues Lou Stringer, a small-time music publisher in Nashville: "I hate to see the music blend. We don't want to forsake country music. It's a tradition of the country. Country-music fans are so loyal that Bill Anderson could sing 'Come to Jesus' in whole notes and they'd buy 'em by the thousands. Country music is our heritage. They oughta teach it in the schools." Chet Atkins says he is "a little worried that country music is

going to lose its identity in all of this," although he has to share some of the blame, if that is the word, for taking the country out of the music. "There are all levels of country music," says Decca's Owen Bradley, one of the principal architects of the Nashville Sound. "When you go to a restaurant you don't order the same thing every time. Cole Porter says 'I love you' one way, Hank Williams says it another way. It's a matter of how much salt you put on your egg." *Billboard*'s Nashville correspondent (and former CMA president), Bill Williams, agrees there "will always be a Loretta Lynn, a Kitty Wells, a Roy Acuff, an Ernest Tubb," but sees a marriage between pop and country: "Dylan, Buffy Sainte-Marie and all of those other stars coming in here to record narrowed the gap between pop and country. A couple of months ago Hank Snow had horns and everything on a record. Sure, the country singers want to be pop. It's the difference between selling 70,000 singles and selling 500,000 singles. Money does it every time." That is the essence of what Jack Stapp of Tree Publishing in Nashville, the company that still reaps royalties from Roger Miller's pivotal pop-country novelty songs, says when he gives his version of the recent evolution of country music: "Say you came from New York and you never had heard country music, but when you *did* finally listen to it there were some things you liked. I mean, most of it was just too damned corny and scratchy for you, but there were certain songs you liked because they were smoother. So then they started modernizing it more because disc jockeys began to get more requests whenever something came out that was a little smoother, like an Eddy Arnold song. They finally combined the two, but still kept that simple story line that to me is country music: the pathos, the miseries, the happiness, life itself, that's what it's all about. And they could get that in there and still they wouldn't have to be so damned nasal, whiny and scratchy and corny. So it just got smoother and smoother, and then it

started blending with more pop music, and so many of the songs would start going pop like Roger's did. It's just good business, to get the best of both worlds."

Maybe there is disagreement on just what the Nashville Sound is, but there is unanimous agreement on what makes it tick: the plentiful supply of talented musicians who work the recording sessions. By now the Nashville sidemen have become internationally famous, almost to the point of being industry folk heroes. Few of them can read formal musical scores. Most of them came into Nashville years ago, begging for a job on the Opry, and after playing the Opry and hacking out a living on the road as a member of somebody's band, they got tired of the harrowing life of one-nighters and poor pay and—fully developed by now as musicians, regardless of their lack of formal training—went into full-time work as studio musicians. It became profitable in the early Fifties, of course, when the recording industry began to boom in Nashville. In those years almost all of the sessions on Music Row were worked by a small clique of extremely talented musicians who had similar Southern small-town backgrounds, were constantly in each other's company and often jammed together in the wee hours at a club in Printer's Alley called the Carousel. There was Chet Atkins on guitar, Floyd Cramer on piano, Buddy Harman on drums, Boots Randolph on saxophone, Bob Moore on bass. They played country music, sure, but their interests didn't stop there. Now Harman and Moore are perhaps the most requested sidemen on the Row, and Atkins, Cramer and Randolph have all developed singular styles and become stars in their own right. That pattern—working the Opry, hitting the road, jamming in clubs, finally going into studio work—has become the customary path for a picker in Nashville today and has developed a feeder system that guarantees the town will never run out of excellent sidemen. And it is a good living. At $85 per three-hour session, more than a dozen Nashville sidemen are raking in a

cool $50,000 a year on recording sessions alone (the third-chair violinist for the Nashville Symphony Orchestra confesses she can make nearly $8,000 in a summer, moonlighting on the Row). They drive the best cars and, most important to them, are home every night for dinner. "Yeah, I'd like to buy me one of those new Cadillacs," jokes Chet Atkins, "but then everybody'd think I was a sideman."

There is a temptation to say that the Nashville sidemen *are* the Nashville Sound. They are generally imperturbable Southern boys who know the neck of their guitar like most people know the back of their hand, completely unflappable people who are able to walk into a studio, take their guitar out of its case, listen to somebody hum the song to be recorded, sit down and fool around with their instrument for five or ten minutes, and then put it down on tape. Producers on Music Row spend very little time correcting the pickers on a session. The pickers know the singers and the producers and the songs, and the pickers know *each other,* which is extremely important. They have played together for years, at the Opry and on the different television shows in Nashville and on the road and on wee-hours jam sessions and on sessions. It follows, then, that when they are brought together for a session there is a beautiful interplay that is not unlike what you find when a great Dixieland quintet is jamming in a smoky New Orleans after-hours club. John D. Loudermilk took out a full-page ad in *Billboard* in 1965 that read, "We're not No. 1. But we are No. 2. That's why we have to try harder. That's why our studio musicians are always so friendly. That's why they give away head arrangements by the dozen daily. Each with a smile. All for scale. They know people produce better when they're happy. And singers sound better when they smile." That is exactly what happened early in '69 when folk singer Bob Dylan came to Nashville and recorded an album called "Nashville Skyline," which showed off a side of Dylan no one had seen before. *Newsweek* said the album was "just a re-

laxed get-together of expert musicians who seem to know each other's—and Dylan's—moves as if they were playing at the Grand Ole Opry." Who cares whether most of them don't read music? "What these guys need is for somebody from the Coast or New York to blow in here and throw out an arrangement five miles long," says Loudermilk. "You know what they'd do around here? They'd take it to the bathroom and learn every chord and come back and play it perfectly."

This relaxed good-old-boyism prevails at any recording session in Nashville ("I've cut records in New York," says one young singer who swears he'll never leave Nashville again, "and before it's over everybody is screaming and hollering at each other and you're a nervous wreck and couldn't sing if you had to"). Nobody is tight. Everybody has fun. It really seems more like a jam session than a recording session that is costing a lot of money and can be pivotal in the career of the singer. A perfect example occurred one day in the Columbia studios just as Marty Robbins was preparing to record. Robbins was loosening his tonsils and the sidemen were flirting with their guitars when the producer's voice came over the control-room microphone, addressing the moon-faced black janitor who was moving things around in the studio.

"Now let's see here, Willie, I think we want to take that set of vibes—that thing right there in front of you—and bring up the xylophone from the basement."

"Yessir," said Willie. "What's a xylophone?"

"That's the one with the little wooden sticks."

"Yessir. Little wooden sticks."

"I think the xylophone is more what we're looking for," the producer said. "It has a kind of marimba sound."

"Yes," said Willie, speaking gravely into a mike. "It has a little of a marimba sound."

Once the howls of laughter and the clattering of drums and the weird guitar licks had subsided, and Robbins regained his composure, they were ready to record.

Before the Nashville sidemen can take over they have to have a song to work on, of course, and here is where the real action was in Nashville during the Sixties. In the old days, just about any song would do as long as it was country and was done by an old favorite like Acuff, Tubb, Kitty Wells or Lefty Frizzell. The people who were buying country records 20 and 30 years ago didn't buy them for the song so much as they bought the artist. All Decca had to do was put out a record with the name of Kitty Wells on it, for instance, and the record would make a nice profit simply because there were a lot of Kitty Wells fans around. It still happens today, which is what Lou Stringer was saying when he said Bill Anderson could release "Come to Jesus" in whole notes and "they'd buy 'em by the thousands." But as tastes changed and competition for the country dollar grew hotter and the lure of the pop charts grew stronger, the burden shifted from the singers to the writers. "You'd better have the song or you're in trouble today," says Decca's Owen Bradley. Again, it was money. Little Jimmy Dickens made a nice living for nearly 20 years by adapting his screaming-country-boy style to almost any back-home-on-the-farm song that happened to come in over the transom, but when he picked up a ridiculous novelty tune entitled "May the Bird of Paradise Fly Up Your Nose" he went into another orbit: the record got pop-station play, he was invited to sing it on Johnny Carson's late-night network television show, he made triple the money that a routine country novelty song would have earned, and he's been looking for another "Bird of Paradise" ever since. "Let's face it," says Bradley, "most of these guys wish they were pop singers because that's where the money is." And what the artists want, the writers—if they are smart—will deliver.

One of the traditions of country music has always been that the songs are written by the same people who sing them.

Some scholars have looked upon this as a phenomenon ("Frank Sinatra doesn't write his songs," wrote one critic, "Dean Martin and Perry Como don't write their songs; why is this?"). Jimmie Rodgers wrote most of his stuff. Hank Williams was more of a writer than he was a singer. Bill Anderson, one of the newer country singing stars, would never have sung a song if he hadn't first been discovered as a writer and then smartly used that like a poker chip to land himself a recording contract. Up until the mid-Sixties, when "pop fever" set in, most of the hit country songs were written by the people who recorded them: Hank Snow ("Moving On"), Lefty Frizzell ("Always Late"), Don Gibson ("Oh, Lonesome Me"), Floyd Tillman ("Slipping Around"), Ernest Tubb ("Soldier's Last Letter") and Anderson ("Still"). The nature of country music, going back to the days when it was holed up in the Appalachian valleys, had been that it was more an expression of a way of life than something intended to make money. The appeal of the early commercial country singing stars was, then, that they were writing what they knew and putting it on record, and if it sold that was fine with them. Corny as much of that music might have been to much of America, there was a certain engaging purity about it. The appeal of that era was, in many ways, exemplified by Hank Williams: here was a haggard country boy from Alabama, unable to handle his booze and his women and his sudden wealth, a great raw talent about to die—one way or another, for sure—before he turned thirty, here he was writing and then recording a song called "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive," and then expiring from pills and booze in the back seat of a Cadillac limousine en route to a one-nighter in Canton, Ohio, for God's sake. When Sinatra does *that,* invite him to supper.

Toward the end of the Sixties, however, even this trademark of country music began to change. Some of the bigger stars were still writing their own stuff in the traditional man-

ner (Merle Haggard, writing and singing about the Okie life in California he had known, was the best example), but now most of them were too busy cashing in on $2,000 one-nighters and syndicated television shows and investments in fast-food franchises to remember where they came from and to write about it. They had turned over the business of composing to a group of talented, and highly commercial, songwriters who knew what would sell and how to write and market it. To illustrate, three of the biggest "country" songs of the late Sixties were "Gentle On My Mind," "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" and "Wichita Lineman," all of them sung by Glen Campbell, an Arkansas farm boy who worked more than his share of honky-tonks and road tours and recording sessions before he hit on a "pop" sound and landed a network television show. "Gentle On My Mind" was written by an Ozark mountain boy named John Hartford, who had been banging around Nashville in a pair of blue jeans for some time, which is okay, until he hit the big time and bugged out for Hollywood, which is not. "Phoenix" and "Wichita Lineman" were written by Jim Webb, the son of a Baptist minister in Oklahoma, which is good, who now lives near Los Angeles and owns seven automobiles and wears sealskin coats and Beatle hair, which is bad (but he "can't be as honest and comfortable in my work as I used to be," which is good). Roger Miller had left Nashville and quit writing ("To me, the man was just a genius," says Jack Stapp, who unconsciously uses the past tense when he speaks of Miller). The country songs written during the late Sixties that appeared to have a good chance of becoming classics were written by Miller or Buck Owens (who happens to be a commercial writer *and* singer rolled into one sequined package) or full-time writers such as Webb, Hartford, Cindy Walker ("In the Misty Moonlight"), Dale Noe ("It's Such a Pretty World Today"), Dallas Frazier ("There Goes My Everything"), Bobby Russell ("Honey" and "Little Green Apples") and the

team of Glenn Sutton and Billy Sherrill ("Almost Persuaded"). The old line that New York book reviewers once used every time a Southern author came out with another novel ("Southerners don't *read* books, they *write* them") had applied, at one time, to country songwriters, and it was part of the romance of their business. But now, with notable exceptions (one being Buddy Killen of Tree Publishing, a close friend of Roger Miller's who wrote Al Hirt's "Sugar Lips"), most of the people writing country songs could also read music. A lot of them had gone to college. A lot of them, like Hank Mills, even studied up before they tried to put down the first note.

"I *believe* in this book," Mills was saying one day over lunch in a restaurant near Music Row. Two years earlier he had been flat broke, but then Dean Martin had latched onto a song of his called "Little Old Wine Drinker Me" ("I'm praying for rain in California/So the grapes will grow and they can make more wine") and now he was able to sit there in a good restaurant, dressed in a black six-button Edwardian suit, forking good beef and discoursing on the science of writing songs. He slapped a 50-cent paperback, *The Magic Power of Emotional Appeal,* which lay next to his plate. The cover of the book asked if you would like to "Make others want to listen to you?" or "Rid yourself of money and business worries?" or "Improve your relations with the opposite sex?" It was sort of a poor man's *How to Win Friends and Influence People.*

"What's it got to do with writing songs?" Mills was asked.

"Everything," he said. "It's really a study of the power of words. I bought fifty copies and gave them to writers, A and R men, even Chet Atkins. It tells you that people are preoccupied with their own problems: money, self-recognition, romance, self-preservation."

"But how does that relate . . . ?"

"Any hit song today has one or more of those elements."

Hank Mills isn't the best songwriter in Nashville today, nor is he the worst. He will do as an example of the professional writer who may have been an entertainer at one time or another but now belongs to that growing fraternity of full-time writers in Nashville who sit down and, quite methodically, tailor songs calculated to run wild in the new pop-country field. Mills, thirty-two, grew up in Maryland ("All the kids in high school called me a hillbilly for picking and singing country songs all the time") but moved to Phoenix on an impulse and took a job as a photoengraver. He began writing songs on the side (his first to be recorded, "Facing the Wall," was cut by country singer Charlie Walker and made it to 18th on the country charts in 1959), but then he had what he calls an "emotional explosion" in 1964 and he and his wife piled into their Renault ("We had to take the back seat out and then tie a three-foot-high box on top just to carry what little stuff we owned") and made the traditional journey to Nashville. He had to work at photoengraving for a while longer, until he signed on as a writer with Hubert Long's Moss Rose publishing house and began to cash in on some of his songs. The big break came, of course, with "Little Old Wine Drinker," which was picked up by Dean Martin in 1967. Now he is one of more than two dozen writers under exclusive contract with Moss Rose (which has five offices for them to use while composing), and has had 70 of the 500-odd songs he has written put on record. He goes into The Row every day, like a businessman going out to set his traps, walking the sidewalks with an attaché case in one hand, dropping by the various offices to talk to singers or A&R men about songs they might be looking for, visiting studios where a song of his is being recorded ("helping direct the session, in a way, because unless you've gone through the birth and the afterbirth of writing a song you don't really know how the song was meant to sound"), picking up royalty checks.

"What the public doesn't know is, I may go to the Ency-

clopaedia Britannica for just the right word," Mills was saying. "Ideas are a dime a dozen. I could sit here for ten minutes and come up with ten good ideas for a song. The idea comes from the mind, but the song comes from the heart—that's my concise definition of country music the way it is today. So you have to have a combination of things. You get the initial idea, and then you *feel* it, and then you work on it. I'll write at home, most of the time, from, say, ten-thirty at night until six in the morning. I'll jot down the key lines, the *ideas*, with a ballpoint pen, then play around with the guitar, and finally I'll go to the typewriter. I worked on 'Kay' (it was currently around tenth on the country charts) for two months. It started out with this truck driver picking up a girl at a truck stop in Chicago and falling in love with her by the time they got to Montgomery but then losing her when she got into some other guy's truck and went on to Tampa. Audie [Ashworth, of Moss Rose] told me, 'You've got something here,' and I took it back home and played with it until it was almost another song. Now it's about a cab driver in Nashville whose girl makes it as a singer and leaves him. It's rare when a song stays like it started out. Anyway, so much for 'Kay.' I'm trying to advance to a higher level. I want to write simple lyrics that'll reach more people, and my goal is to expose ignorance. That's why I tried out that song about those two Southern kids, one black and the other one white, falling in love and running off to Memphis [Music Row, it must be reported, blanched at the very idea]. This book," Hank Mills said, "represents sort of a self-imposed program of improvement."

It was as though Hank Mills were speaking for the entire music industry in Nashville. Country music *stayed* country for so long because the people who made it and listened to it were innately conservative. It took a long time for Nashville

to react to the rock 'n' roll fad of the late Fifties that nearly inundated country music, but finally Music Row created—or went along with, take your pick—rockabilly. Many people along The Row are still resentful of Eddy Arnold, who took the country out of country music and became the nation's first token hillbilly. A lot of them seem to get a certain pleasure out of saying Roger Miller isn't writing songs any more, that he was a flash in the pan, that he doesn't have the staying power of, say, a Webb Pierce. But a Webb Pierce can write a pure country song for a pure country audience and even if it becomes a country hit it may sell fewer than 100,000 singles (if he writes it *and* sings it, that would bring him only $6,500). And they have to be aware of what "King of the Road" did for Roger Miller's bank account: two million singles sold, four and a half cents each for Miller the singer and two cents each for Miller the writer, total of $130,000 for Miller the-bum-who-abandoned-country music. And so the Nashville Sound was undergoing plastic surgery as the Sixties came to an end, and if economics was one reason, it was matched by the coming to power of a new breed of young cats who had been weaned on Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley rather than Ernest Tubb and Lefty Frizzell. These new ones might have been raised in the country, but they had cut out as quickly as they could raise Trailways fare to the nearest big town. They may have grown up listening to the Opry and hearing Roy Acuff sing "Great Speckled Bird," but their generation didn't understand why you have to be so damned maudlin and use lines like "my dear old mother" and "jewel of my heart" when you could be cool, man, like Bobby Russell was when he wrote "Little Green Apples"—

God didn't make the little green apples,
And it don't rain in Indianapolis in the summertime . . .

—and there is one for you, redheaded Bobby Russell of Nashville, Tenn., home of the Grand Ole Opry, who has become a hero of this new generation of writers.

"Yeah, Bobby and I have known each other a pretty long time," a young music publisher named Buzz Cason was saying. Cason wore old-fashioned rimless glasses, hair to his eyebrows, a white bush jacket over a black turtleneck sweater. He and Russell, who had also written a smash song called "Honey," co-own a publishing company in Nashville. "Bobby graduated from Hillsboro High, and I went to Litton. We had rival rock bands while we were in high school, though, you know, and we were like enemies back then. I started working with a band here called 'The Casuals,' backing Brenda Lee, and then I went to the Coast producing Top Forty stuff for a year. When I came back to Nashville, Bobby and I started Hit Records. We aped the big records and sold ours to places like Zayre's. Cheap copies, you know. You could buy Dean Martin doing a song for ninety-seven cents, but you could buy Bobby Russell doing the same song for, like, forty-one cents. Before we got together, Bobby was a twenty-five-dollar-a-week 'draw' writer, you know, advance-against-royalties, for Bill Lowery down in Atlanta."

"That's a great song," Cason was told. " 'Honey.' "

"Yeah, there's about two hundred versions of it now."

" 'Honey' was his wife, somebody said."

"Right. When he wrote it he sang it to her, and she cried. He knew he had a winner then."

Cason and Russell knew they had a winner, too, in "Little Green Apples." Roger Miller's road manager called Cason and Russell one day and said, "You got anything for Roger?" and Cason says he told him, "Sure," to borrow some time for Russell. "A week later, Bobby gave 'em 'Little Green Apples.' The day after Roger recorded it I called Bobby from Indianapolis. 'What's happening?' he said. I told him, 'It's raining.' " Dollars.

SESSION AT BRADLEY'S BARN

> I've been asked what the Nashville Sound is a thousand times, and I've given a thousand different answers. And I think I've been right every time. It's a song that's our kind of song and a bunch of musicians who can put it over.
>
> —Owen Bradley in *Newsweek*, 1966

Determining which of Nashville's two dozen recording studios is the "best" is too subjective. It is like asking a .200 hitter which is the best baseball park in the country and having him tell you without hesitation that it is Crosley Field in Cincinnati—probably the worst in the major leagues, but where he happens to have a lifetime batting average of .435. Similarly, a Nashville performer is going to kiss the floor of the studio where he has recorded his hits, and bitch about the lousy acoustics in the ones where he has bombed. But there is little doubt that one of the most popular and best-equipped studios in Nashville, and certainly the most unique, is Bradley's Barn: a rustic 35-year-old red barn lo-

cated on the rolling farmland some 20 miles east of town in Wilson County, far away from the traffic and the tour buses and the general annoyances of Music Row. Only three years after its conversion into a modern recording studio, the Barn was jumping with four sessions a day (1,000 sessions were predicted for 1969), had become the sentimental favorite of many Nashville artists and visiting pop stars ("If anybody wants to bug you, they've got to go a long way to do it," says one superstar), and was even honored when a British folk duo called the Beau Brummels recorded an album there and titled it simply, and with some reverence, "Bradley's Barn."

Like the Opry and the Nashville Sound and almost everything else related to the Nashville music industry, the Barn was an accident. Owen Bradley, Decca's top A&R man in Nashville, has a second home at Mt. Juliet, Tenn., on Old Hickory Lake, where he and his family live from April to November. His route to and from work every day took him past a farm on Bender's Ferry Road, only a mile and a half from his home. One day in the early Sixties the idea struck Bradley that he ought to buy the place and clean up the barn so his oldest son, who had just started a publishing company, could cut demonstration tapes. Since his yacht club is nearby, he also envisioned it as a perfect place for throwing parties and "just sitting around listening to music." So he did buy it, patched up the cracks in the roof, insulated it, installed a bar, dug two wells, hung a few baffles from the ceiling, and then his son began cutting occasional demos in the solitude of the pastoral Middle Tennessee countryside. "It never was intended to be what it is today," Bradley insists. But this was '65 and the recording boom had caught Nashville with only a dozen studios, so when word of Bradley's makeshift studio spread there were requests for him to produce full-scale sessions there. By the time Loretta Lynn had gone there to record her hit, "Don't Come Home A-drinkin' with Lovin' on Your Mind," the stampede was on and soon

the gravel parking area in front of Bradley's Barn was being filled with cars from ten o'clock in the morning until after midnight every day of the week. It eventually became the recording home of such non-country stars as Pete Fountain and Lenny Dee. Bradley denies the story that the Barn was planned, that when he sold the original Bradley Studio on Sixteenth Avenue to Columbia Records there was a clause forbidding him to open another studio in Davidson County. "I just lost a party room and gained a recording studio," he says.

The story of the Barn fits Bradley, a hulking man whose sartorial tastes lean toward flannel sport shirts and ripple-soled boots rather than double-breasted blazers and paisley ties ("You can ask him to come to an important meeting," says Hubert Long, "and when he says, 'Do y'all really need *me*?' what he means is, 'Oh, hell, I've got to put on a *tie* again' "). He is as unflappable as a gentleman farmer ("I'm just a *hilly-billy*"), and his relaxed drawl belies the fact that he is one of those who pioneered the Nashville music industry 20 years ago and had his own contributions to make to the Nashville Sound. He unwittingly sums up his own style as an A&R man, in fact, when giving his definition of that sound: "It isn't so much a sound as it is a way of doing things. It's a bunch of good musicians getting together and doing what comes naturally. Of course, you've got to have a referee. A session like that can be chaos or it can be very good."

The referee on this bright cold winter morning at Bradley's Barn was, once more, Owen Bradley. It was a few minutes before ten o'clock, almost time for the first session of the day. Kitty Wells, "The Queen of Country Music," would attempt the near-impossible chore of taping five songs for an album in three hours. While she was getting situated and some of the sidemen were tuning their instruments, Bradley was behind the bar pouring a cup of coffee for one of the

Jordanaires, the singing group that would back Kitty on the session.

"Good coffee," the singer said.

"That coffee machine's about the best we've ever had," Bradley said. "Hey, where'd you get those cuff links?"

"Connie Francis."

"Y'all work with her?"

"Right. She gave everybody a pair. Engraved."

"I've got some just like those," Bradley said.

"From Connie?"

"Pete Fountain." Bradley sipped the coffee and laughed. "Poor Pete. Whoever engraved 'em put an *s* on the end of my first name. *Owens* Bradley. He gave something to my wife, too, but Kathryn came out spelled with a *C*."

"I'll bet she was mad about that."

"Mad?" said Bradley. "She was so proud, I thought she was gonna change her name to fit the engraving. What time do you have?"

"Three after ten."

Bradley gulped the rest of his coffee and tossed the Styrofoam cup into a trash can. "Ready to go to work, Miss Kitty?" he said, pushing a narrow-brim charcoal-colored tweed hat back on his head and shuffling toward the darkened control booth like a farmer going to check the henhouse.

Trying to put down five songs in three hours would be ridiculous for most artists (two songs, or both sides of a single, is par for the course), but for a professional like Kitty Wells it is as good as done. Kitty (Muriel Deason, actually, of Nashville) has been singing professionally for more than 25 years. She began as a gospel singer, traveling with her husband, Johnny Wright, but when she cut her first record for Decca in 1952, a song called "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels" (her biggest yet—it has sold 750,000

copies and is still reissued on albums from time to time), she established herself as the leading female vocalist in country music. Between 1952 and 1963, 19 of her records reached the Top Ten in *Billboard*'s country charts. She was knocked off her pedestal only once, by Patsy Cline, who died in a plane crash in '63. Now fifty years old and the mother of three children (one of them, singer Bobby Wright, played the part of Willie Moss on the "McHale's Navy" television series), she continues to go on the road (265 one-nighters in '63) between recording sessions and tapings of the popular Wright-Wells television show. She has neither true pitch nor a good sense of rhythm, but her nasal straight-from-the-Appalachians twang is the most distinctive female sound in the business and has kept her such a big favorite in rural areas for so long that nobody can argue with her success. One side business venture of hers, the *Kitty Wells Country Kitchen Cook Book* ("The queen of country music has collected recipes from all over the world while traveling," reads an ad), proves she knows where her friends are.

Still, it would be a hard three hours' work. The songs she would record were current country hits like Johnny Cash's "Daddy Sang Bass" and Sonny James's "Only the Lonely," none of them her kind of song, meaning several takes would likely be required before getting something on tape. While Owen and his son set up things in the control booth, Kitty, in an avocado wool skirt and a flowery print blouse, stood beneath a boom mike in the studio and rehearsed "Born to Be with You" with the sidemen: three guitars (including Owen's brother, Harold Bradley, one of the best sidemen in Nashville), steel, bass, piano and drum. "Miss Kitty, you're still behind the beat, hon," Bradley said over the intercom from the booth. When they started to go over it again from the top, the Jordanaires' leader, Gordon Stoker, the one with the cuff links from Connie Francis, slipped over to the bar for another cup of coffee while there was time.

"You see this yet?" Stoker said, spreading a clipping on the bar. It was from a British publication, the *New Musical Express*, giving the results of a poll that placed the Jordanaires fourth in the World Vocal Group category. They ranked behind the Beatles, the Beach Boys and the Rolling Stones, and Stoker was grinning like a new father.

"In England?" he was asked.

"Yeah. I couldn't believe it."

"You must work there a lot."

"England? We've never been in *Europe.*"

It was, indeed, a compliment. The Jordanaires started as a gospel quartet in 1949 but made a name for themselves in the late Fifties when they began backing Elvis Presley on all of his recordings. Although there had been vocal backing on other country records over the years, the success Presley had with the Jordanaires' smooth backgrounding added another ingredient to the Nashville Sound. The Anita Kerr Singers came along in the same period, and for a while you could hear either of the two four-voice groups on a majority of Nashville recordings. The breakup of the Kerr Singers left most of the big jobs to the Jordanaires, and today they are busier than a pit crew at Daytona Speedway. They average three recording sessions a day, five days a week, 52 weeks a year (they stagger their vacations so they won't miss a stroke), and this leaves no time for television, the Opry, personal appearances or recordings of their own. Who needs it? At $85 each per session, each man can earn $65,000 a year singing in the studio all day and eating home cooking at night. And tending to their outside business interests, which are considerable: a country-music clothing shop, two publishing companies, and interest in two food concerns and a recording studio.

"Presley changed a lot of things," Stoker was saying as he leaned against the bar. "The sound of country music, the whole style of the stars, everything. They had some figures

somewhere that showed how he was responsible for the increase in phonograph and guitar sales. We know better than anybody else that he created a demand for vocal groups in Nashville." He crumpled the paper coffeecup and flipped it away. "That was some experience, working with him. He's an unhappy, unsatisfied man. You never know what he's going to do. Two weeks ago he was all set to record here, but then he canceled and did it in Memphis. Said he was never going to record here again. A pretty unpredictable guy, Presley."

It was 10:25, and in the control booth Owen Bradley had the tapes set and felt it was time to put something down. "I tell you, I think we're about ready to record," he said over the intercom. "Miss Kitty, just a couple of places, and you know where they are." The Jordanaires stood in a semicircle around a stand, "reading" their chord changes off a yellow legal pad (a system two of them adapted from something they learned studying music in college). The sidemen were spread around the studio, some of them behind baffles that looked like room dividers, and Kitty stood below her boom mike, the words to "Born to Be with You" typed on a sheet of paper on a stand in front of her, ready any time they were. For the next two hours they worked and sweated and tried it over and over again. "Born to Be with You." *You've got to wait right there a little longer, hon, before you come in again.* Playing Cash's single of "Daddy Sang Bass," adapting it for Kitty's style. *That's a little too high for you, Kitty, let's drop it; now Daddy's gonna really sing bass.* Playing Buck Owens' version of "I've Got You On My Mind Again." *If we want to do five sides, we'll have to move along.* Owen Bradley, as patient as a bream fisherman. Kitty Wells, as if she were at home baking meat loaf. The sidemen, making changes as they go along, like playing a ukulele at a beach party. Jerry Bradley, the engineer and manager of the Barn, Owen's oldest son, flailing his arms over the control panel like a NASA engineer at Cape Kennedy. *Let's try this,* says Owen, bound-

ing out of the control booth and taking over the piano to demonstrate. Glancing at the Nashville *Tennessean* during a break—NIXON VOWS NEW PEACE TACTICS and Ann-Margret Comes to Town for a Recording Session. *Whoever thought he'd hear Kitty Wells doing a Roy Orbison song?* says Bradley; *this is what's happening in Nashville.* Back to battle stations. *If we don't get it right this time, Kitty, it'll mean another session.* Miss Kitty gets it right. On the button, one o'clock sharp. "Well," says Johnny Wright, "there's another album in the can. Now let's go to Canada for a couple of weeks."

When it was over, some of the sidemen packed their instruments and hustled off for their second job of the day. Kitty and Johnny left, after listening to the last tape, leaving Owen Bradley and his son alone in the dark control booth to sort out the tapes. "You interested in renting the lake house for five hundred dollars a month?" Jerry Bradley said as he ran the tapes back, the machine whining like a high-speed drill.

"Who?" Owen said.

"Guy in New York."

"He vacationing, or what?"

"Working. Said they're going to spend two weeks rehearsing, two weeks recording, two weeks remixing. He wanted to get a studio for six weeks."

"You don't rehearse in a studio."

"I told him. So now he wants an old house with six bedrooms."

"For five hundred dollars a month?"

"That's what he'll pay."

"Hell," said Owen Bradley, pulling the jaunty tweed hat over his forehead and throwing his legs on a table. "He could *buy* a house for five hundred dollars out here."

MAKING IT

> There was this old boy who'd hitchhiked to Nashville, and he wasn't doing so good. Real late one night he got homesick and broke out his guitar and started singing just to keep himself company. Pretty soon the guy that ran the boardinghouse started banging on the door and said, "Hey, don't you know there's a sick lady upstairs?" And this old boy said, "Naw, but maybe if you hum me a couple o' bars I can get the hang of it."
>
> —APOCRYPHAL

Almost everybody on Music Row knows Mom Upchurch. Her real name is Mrs. Louis K. (Delia) Upchurch, but to some 2,000 country musicians who have lived in her house over the past 20 years she is known as "Mom" or "Ma." Mrs. Upchurch was born at Greensboro, Tenn., in 1891, to a former Texas farmer who lived to be ninety-seven. When her husband died right after World War II, Pee Wee King and the Golden West Cowboys were living with them in the neat two-story stucco-and-rock house on Boscobel Street, about a mile across the Cumberland River bridge from the Opry

House in what is called East Nashville. Since Mrs. Upchurch needed the cash to take care of herself, she decided to take in more boarders. Pee Wee King spread the word, and other struggling young country musicians started moving in. There were the Carter Family, Carl Smith, Faron Young, Stonewall Jackson, Hank Cochran, Grandpa Jones, Roger Miller and an endless string of lesser-known writers and sidemen. Mom charged Depression rates, and it reached the point where any aspiring country musician with any contacts at all would try to rent a room from Mom before he even left home on the traditional trip to Nashville to find the end of the rainbow. Those who lived there were her boys, and she would cook for them and darn their socks and clean up their rooms and obediently take messages for them while they were out on the road playing one-nighters. She would accept only country musicians as boarders ("They don't mix too good with people in other livelihoods"), and her musical tastes were concrete: "I just like good old hillbilly music."

Mom Upchurch is still in business on Boscobel, charging eight dollars a week rent, although she had to quit serving meals to the boys years ago when she fell and broke her hip on a trip to the grocery store ("But I let 'em keep their own food in the ice box and use the kitchen if they want to"). Now she is seventy-nine years old, a girthy, bespectacled, God-fearing great-grandmother who hasn't lost any of her love for country music ("I go to the Opry now and then, if the boys get me a ticket"). Over the years, she estimates, maybe 2,000 musicians and writers have lived with her in the same old house. Rumor has it that there are some who *still* haven't paid Mom her rent, but most of them who went on to better things have never forgotten their days at Mom's place. She will receive close to 150 Christmas cards every year, and now and then she will get an invitation from singer Carl Smith to come on out to his 350-acre ranch in Franklin, Tenn., and do a little fishing with him. And just before

Christmas of 1967 a large number of her boys popped in on her, bearing gifts, to thank her for what she had done for them during their hours of need. One of the gifts was a plaque that now hangs on a wall in the living room: "To Ma Upchurch. In appreciation for the many contributions you have made to Country Music and for the home you have provided for many a po' hillbilly. Your Boys."

"I near 'bout cried when they gave me that," Mom was saying late one snowy January afternoon. "Lot of 'em brought their families. You could've stirred 'em with a stick in here."

"How many boys do you have now?" she was asked.

"Five, I think it is."

"Is there room for everybody?"

"Gets a little crowded sometimes, with just one bath. One time I had fourteen at once. That's in five bedrooms, and one of those is mine. Had a rollaway and a sofa bed, but to this day I don't see how we made it." She looked out onto the bleak street and smiled. "Carl Smith, now, Carl was one of my pets. He came in here from Maynardsville about 1953 with a 1936 Chevrolet, and that old car must've stayed out there on the street covered with snow all winter. Stonewall Jackson, he went out the door every Saturday afternoon and walked all the way to the Opry in the snow in shoes that had holes in 'em. George here, he's got it a little better now."

George was George Owens, one of Mom's five remaining roomers. Owens had come into Nashville two years earlier, a native of Albright, W. Va., who had been playing guitar in a night club in Baltimore, and he had sought out Mom for a place to live. Once established, he started making the rounds, talking to producers and singers, joining in on jam sessions, hanging around the studios. One night he was having a beer at Tootsie's Orchid Lounge when the steel-guitar player for Del Reeves came in and asked out loud if anybody knew where he could find a lead guitar man real fast. Owens

told him about a guy named George Owens, took off for a three-day trip to Florida with Reeves, and has been with him ever since. Now he earns about $7,500 a year as Reeves's "front man" (playing lead guitar, singing to warm up the crowd before the boss comes on) and has recorded five records of his own with RCA Victor. "It's gotten so now," Owens was saying, "that whenever somebody needs a picker in a hurry they just call Mom's or Tootsie's and ask if anybody's available."

George Owens is just one of thousands who have come piling into Nashville over the years in search of the brass ring. Generally they are grim young men from small Southern towns or farms who have little education and absolutely no idea what their first move will be once they make Nashville. But they come, from Fordyce, Ark., and Greenwood, Miss., and Graniteville, S.C., on buses or in tired old Chevrolets or by thumb, with a guitar in their hands and rolled-up scraps of paper with their latest compositions scribbled with a snub-nosed pencil in their pockets, and the second they locate in one of the dirt-cheap boardinghouses dotting downtown Nashville they find out which way Music Row is and they start walking. They know they can make it, because everybody back home in Tupelo says their songs are great and they sing just like ol' Jimmie Rodgers; or they won the Jaycees talent contest back in Beckley, and now's the time to strike; or they just flat got weary of working at the Phillips 66 station out in Leaksville. And once they reach The Row they start knocking on doors, and everybody is cordial to them and they just missed Mr. Bradley and why not try Pamper Music down the street? And so, getting absolutely nowhere, they scurry back to the flophouse and lay awake all night and wonder why it didn't work for them when it worked for Stonewall Jackson. Stonewall, the legend goes, drove up from South Georgia in a pickup truck one day, double-parked it in

front of the WSM offices downtown, and an hour later came out with an Opry contract in his hand. Jimmy Driftwood was making $2,700 a year as a schoolteacher in Snowball, Ark., when he wrote "Battle of New Orleans" and it became a big hit. Another guy, a singer who would prefer anonymity, was working at a motel near Music Row and got to know some of the writers and producers by making things easier for them when they dropped by for a nooner with their ladies, and got his break one day when, after the ladies had gone, he sat around picking his guitar and—*glory*—one of the producers asked him to come for an audition. Porter Wagoner was driving a truck in Missouri before he made it, Bill Anderson was an underpaid disc jockey in North Georgia, Jeannie Riley was a Music Row secretary, and on and on and on. The hopefuls are very much aware of these stories, having read *Country Song Roundup* from birth, and they do not question the odds, just as Southern boys of 20 years ago didn't question the odds when they hitchhiked off to Florida to try to land a contract with a Class D baseball club. So they continue to hang around Tootsie's and an inexpensive restaurant across the street called Linebaugh's ("There've been a lot of country songs written on napkins in that place," says one Nashville star, who knows firsthand), buttonholing Music Row executives right on the street, mailing demo tapes to publishing houses (Cedarwood, one of them, spends more than $250 a week for mailing back rejected tapes and manuscripts), sneaking backstage at the Opry on weekend nights in hopes of showing somebody something, trying to get a spot on one of the local radio or television country shows, hoping against hope. The majority of them soon run out of money and go home. The luckier ones, those with some talent and the right breaks, wind up on the bottom rung of the ladder and, if they are smart, are content to take them one at a time: fill in with somebody's band, impress them enough to become a regular, improve the skills enough to get in on some of the studio

action, write a few songs, show that you can sing the song better than anybody else, quit and hire your own band, and then—*zoom.*

It is worth fighting for, because there is a life of wealth and adoration awaiting the ones who persevere and become big country stars. Of those performers who live in and work out of Nashville, approximately 15 rank as "superstars" (worth at least $1,250 for a one-nighter, before expenses) and another two dozen are called "stars" (between $750 and $1,250 per concert). Two of the wealthiest citizens of Nashville are Roy Acuff (real estate, Roy Acuff Exhibits, half the take from Acuff-Rose Publications) and Eddy Arnold (fast-food franchise, a large suburban development called Brentwood, royalties from all of those hits still rolling in). The old stereotype of the poor-boy-made-rich-hillbilly-star still holds true, to some extent (Webb Pierce once owned a Cadillac with hundreds of silver dollars imbedded in its carcass, plus *real* six-shooters for door handles). "Yeah," says one lawyer who has been handling their affairs lately, "they come in here and make their first million, and then blow it, and then they come looking for me." Today's country stars still have a penchant for horses and cattle and fancy clothes and Cadillacs and extra women and well-stocked liquor cabinets and guitar collections and boats and planes and expensive hobbies (several of them back stock-car drivers, and Marty Robbins drives his own stock car every weekend at Nashville Speedway). But the new crowd is more business-oriented. Many of them, like Bill Anderson and George Hamilton IV, are college graduates who took a good look around when they first came to town and saw the faded former stars strewn about town like ships on a beach, and decided they were going to do things differently if they made it. Anderson, for instance, put $10,000 into Arnold's Brentwood development (at a lawyer's insistence, it must be added), opened his own publishing company to handle his songs and anything that might

slide in under the door, and started looking around for solid investments. George Jones owns a profitable night club called Possum Holler, right out the back door of the Opry. Ownership of radio stations by stars is popular because it is profitable *and* helpful to the career. The wealth that comes the way of a country star is even more dazzling, of course, when you realize that most of them might otherwise be back home working in the mines or driving a truck or running a beer joint.

There is a dark side to it all, though, just as being a Broadway star or a Hollywood sex symbol or a Beatle is not all happiness and light. Except for the rare ones like Glen Campbell and Eddy Arnold and, most recently, Johnny Cash, who leap into an orbit where they can command five-figure paychecks for one-shot concerts and thus don't have to beat the bushes to keep up with expenses, a country star must jump onto a never-ending merry-go-round or he is dead. A $1,000-a-night fee sounds good, but out of that must come bottomless expenses: five-piece band, motels and meals, $50,000 bus or luxury camper, driver, secretary back at the office, sound system to take into the boondocks, slices for promoters and agents, office space in Nashville, up to a dozen tailor-made $500 show costumes (made for most of them by Nudie's, in Hollywood) and matching hand-tooled boots, and, of course, guitars and other instruments. Thus, most Nashville stars will play at least 100 one-night shows a year, all across the country and in Europe and Asia, pushing hard to make it from one show to the next, gone two and three weeks at a time, playing everything from high-school football fields to Cobo Hall in Detroit. The road gets to you after a while. The road keeps you away from home and puts you in contact with strange ladies ("All you've got to do is pick one out in the first row and look at her hard and you've got it made," says one superstar quite matter-of-factly, adding that for five years he made up his bed and left on one

soft light before leaving the motel to work a show). This causes divorce, something that is not new to the Nashville music crowd (the champion being Ferlin Husky, singer of "Gone," who took his sixth bride in 1968). It also causes liquor and pills, taken like medication to keep going one more night. And it also causes tragedy, explaining why so many country stars in recent years have died in automobile or plane accidents (Cowboy Copas, Patsy Cline and Hawkshaw Hawkins died in a plane crash in 1963, returning from a benefit show for the family of a disc jockey killed in an accident, Jack Anglin of Johnny & Jack was killed as he drove to one of the funerals, and singing star Jim Reeves and his piano-playing manager died in a plane crash little more than a year later). In an interview just before he was killed, Reeves said it for all of them: "I book one hundred personal appearances a year because I like to perform before people. But what I dislike most is the traveling. The main trouble and danger with tours is getting there and getting back." It is not, as some have suggested, a mystical "death wish" that all country stars, including Hank Williams, have had. When you average 100,000 miles a year on the open highway, often driving tired, often in the middle of the night and in bad weather because if you don't make it to the next town you lose out on more than $1,000, the law of averages is going to get you sooner or later. It has to be one of the major reasons for the establishment some years ago of the Opry Trust Fund, which is maintained by the industry to help widows and performers who are, for one reason or another, down on their luck. To be frank, and to offer a sober defense in behalf of the maligned "hillbilly singer," it is a wonder that there are not *more* divorces and tragedies and pillheads and breakdowns and alcoholics in the business than there are already. The temptations and the pressures fall heavy on an old boy from East Tennessee who quit school in the ninth grade and bummed a ride to Nashville and, by the time he is twenty-

one, has sixteen-year-old teeny-boppers falling all over him and makes $200,000 a year and NBC-TV wants to talk to him about a contract and Hollywood is interested and his little East Tennessee wife back home can't understand what's happening and he's, *Jesus,* got to find *some* way to stay awake for that show Sunday night in Amarillo.

You wonder, for example, whether Porter Wagoner is standing up under the pressure and, if so, how long he can make it. Wagoner was born in West Plains, Mo., in 1932, when times were not good at all, and he had to quit school in the seventh grade to go to work. He drove a truck for a while, worked on a farm for a while, and he made his show-business debut when he was sixteen and worked in a meat market: the owner heard him playing his guitar during lunch break one day and talked him into doing a 15-minute show from the market every day at 6 A.M., meaning Wagoner came in at 5 to sweep up, did the show, then went back to learning how to be a butcher. He got a spot on the Ozark Jubilee when he was twenty, attracted attention and made his first record when he was twenty-three. Today he makes at least a quarter of a million dollars a year from his investments and the numerous hit songs he has recorded ("Green, Green Grass of Home" being one) and from the 100 or more one-nighters he will play, has one of the biggest of the syndicated country television shows (to some 100 markets) and, most important, has the pure hard-country fans by the throat. Wagoner is about as country as you can get: a hollow-chested, big-nosed, toothy, rough-handed, lanky good old boy who wears a diamond-studded saddle-shaped ring and peroxided-ducktailed-sideburned hair and garishly sequined cowboy suits that defy description. He addresses everybody as "hoss" and his language is sprinkled with things like "her and me is goin'" and "soon's we git th' thang drawed up" and "he done an awful lot for me," and, to WSM disc jockey Ralph Emery one night, in reply to a question about what made him click:

"I guess it 'uz because I was a *sin*-cere person." Well, by God, he is. Porter Wagoner is a country boy and he doesn't try to forget it, and there is a certain beauty in that. When he and his band, the Wagon Masters, and girl singer Dolly Parton, a petite blonde of incredible vanilla-ice-cream beauty, hit the stage of the Opry, it is gut-country music at its purest. Wagoner will drawl the words of "Big Wind's A-comin'," about the old days back home on the farm, and turn over the instrumental break to a sawed-off fiddler named Mack McGaha and an electric banjo picker named Buck Trent, both of them first-class musicians and entertainers; then a word about his sponsor, Black Draught cough syrup; then Miss Dolly, in a quivering Appalachian soprano, will sing about the good old days ("when times were bad"); and, finally, if there's time, a gospel song to close it out. Where, you wonder, does a man with a background like that learn to handle it? Early in 1969, Wagoner went into a hospital for at least the second time in a year with a complete nervous collapse. Along The Row they were saying it was either another split with his good friend, singer Mel Tillis, or else it was female trouble.

But life goes on in show business' most colorful and most unique family, and the stars do the best with what they've got. Well aware of what First Family Nashville thinks of them, they stay close to their own haunts when they are at home—living together, many of them, in Eddy Arnold's subdivision; partying together on the once clandestine Printer's Alley, where Boots Randolph runs the biggest club; fishing together, recording, taping television shows, writing songs, flying planes, riding horses or, in 1968, politicking (Roy Acuff and Tex Ritter for Nixon, dozens for Wallace, not a soul for Humphrey). There *are* some professional jealousies, of course, the most obvious one being the strange and irrational campaign against Eddy Arnold, who was the first country singer to break into the pop field some 20 years ago

(it broke out into warfare at the 1969 Grammy Awards Banquet at the National Guard Armory, when Arnold stepped to the stage and was greeted with a chorus of *bwok-bok-bok-bok* chicken calls, a reference to his going into the fried-chicken business, delivered not totally in good humor). But they are, for the most part, not the kind of people to be sniping at one another like ladies in a bridge club; and besides, they're too busy fending off their fans. Ah, yes, the fan clubs. Nobody is more loyal than a dues-paying, record-buying, one-nighter-going country-music fan. They are waiting at the auditorium in Shreveport early in the afternoon when, say, Loretta Lynn checks in, and they are foisting birthday cakes and hamburgers and homemade pies and crates of oranges on their favorites (Minnie Pearl came down with food poisoning once, no thanks to a cake-baking lady fan). They are dropping by the office on Music Row. They are sewing shirts for Del Reeves, buying boots for Tex Ritter, baking cakes for Stu Phillips, sending birthday greetings to Roy Drusky's kids, knitting socks for Marty Robbins and sending tape recordings of their nine-year-old nephew singing "Come On Home and Sing the Blues to Daddy" to Bob Luman. They are falling in love and, in fits of passion, composing propositions like the one lady-killer Bill Anderson got from a teen-aged girl in rural Michigan—

> Take a helicopter they can land any place that is the only way you can come and get me. You can see a big field the field is on 19 Mile Road. . . . Come at night so know will see me go with you I need about 4 or 5 men to carry out the 5 boxes and a hat box. If you do not want me give this litter to Johnny Cash.

—and what do you do except be nice and don't get 'em stirred up? One survey showed that the average country-music fan will own around 100 records. He or she will put

away the pennies and shell out up to seven dollars for a seat to see a Marty Robbins come to town and sing a dozen songs ("God love 'em, they'll do anything for you but leave you alone," says Robbins). So the fan club becomes a necessary evil. You name one of them president and let her, usually a nice middle-aged lady, publish a kind of internal newsletter now and then and maybe come to Nashville for a visit once a year. Charge a dollar or two a year for membership to defray some of the mailing costs. Let the secretary mail out Christmas cards. Buck Owens, in California, doesn't charge a membership fee and has a 10,000-member club (it got so big, he shut off membership a year ago), but most will run at around 1,000 members. Ah, the fans. *No, I don't drink. The guy that wrote that story is an alcoholic himself.* Yes, the fans. *The girl on the bus with us in Topeka? My sister. Ah, Mary, ah, Mary Jane.* The sock-knitting, shirt-making, cake-baking fans. *Get it up to 60 and let's just by God see if I can't hit one of them pine trees with this birthday cake.* The pretty, young, adoring fans. *Well, see, I left all the albums back at the hotel, but if you can come up in about a half hour I'd be glad to . . .* But the stars in Nashville endure and enjoy, spinning around on their never-stopping merry-go-round, raking in the cash, praying for a record that will spill over into the pop charts, finding things to do with their money, loading up the bus for another tour of one-nighters, mailing back unsolicited song manuscripts from gas jockeys in East Texas ("I wrote the lyrics and also the words," penned one author in a cover letter), now and then pausing to think of where they *might* be right now but for the grace of God or somebody, but coming out of it very quickly when they look up and see, as big as the Lord, with that great face and the long hair and the swallowtail coat, right there on the television screen, arrogantly strumming his guitar neck like he didn't know which end you're supposed to play, right there on *network* TV, *what am I doing wrong and why is he there and*

I'm here, and him and that goddam *snarl* on his face, and *I'll bet that's a bunch of crap about Folsom Prison . . .* and they are slapped to the ground, crashed, beaten, flattened, deflated, smothered, suffocated, sent sprawling, made to look silly, utterly overpowered, out-gunned, overshadowed and reduced to sawdust by . . . Johnny Cash.

I hear that train a-comin',
Comin' 'round the bend,
I ain't seen the sunshine
Since I don't know when;
Well I'm stuck in Folsom Prison,
And time keeps draggin' on. . . .

Let the record be set straight from the beginning: Johnny Cash is *not* a jailbird, a pillhead, a brawler, a murderer or even a bad boy. In the summer of '69, when his popularity had spilled over into the pop- and folk-music audiences, such a legend had grown up around him that it was too late for anybody to deny any of these things. His songs about prison and despair, sung in a flat, slightly off-key voice of doom, Cash wearing all black, Cash with human suffering in his deep eyes and on his tortured face, Cash insolent and lashing out from the stage, Cash in a black swallowtail coat and striped morning pants like an elegant undertaker, Cash swinging his guitar around and pointing it at his listeners as though it were a tommy gun, all of these things captured the whole world and made Johnny Cash of Dyess, Ark., the most charismatic figure in show business. "Johnny Cash?" people in New York were saying when ABC-TV announced "The Johnny Cash Show" as a prime-time summer replacement. "I thought he was dead from pills or something." The kids on Harvard Square believed without question that Cash had done time at Folsom Prison for crimes ranging up to murder, and that his album recorded live from Folsom was the purest

expression of Artist-Saying-What-He-Knows, and they became irritated when advised it wasn't necessarily so. People *wanted* to believe the legend of Johnny Cash, and when there were no fresh Cash tales to repeat they made up new ones. "You know where he got that hole in the right side of his face, don't you?" said an awed Nashville sideman one night as the boys stood around drinking coffee at Bradley's Barn after a session. "The way I heard it, on his and June's wedding night she was going through his pockets and found some pills and asked him if he'd taken any, and when he said he'd had a couple she nailed him with a spiked high-heel shoe right in the mouth." The facts were that Johnny Cash had been raised on an Arkansas farm and had suffered through a rough childhood, that Cash had found temporary stardom in his early twenties, that Cash had gone through a rough six-year period where he popped pep pills and tranquilizers at the same time, that Cash has spent a total of one day and one night in jail in his whole life (both times for possession of pills that would have been legal had he had a prescription), that Cash got scared into his senses and straightened up, that Cash married June Carter of the Carter Family because she is his kind of people and she understands his moodiness, that he supports the war in Vietnam and really can't understand the kids on the college campuses who idolize him ("hippahs," he calls them), and that his shows, rather than being folk-festival-type jam sessions that end when the spirit moves him, are run on meticulous timetables rivaling the D-Day invasion of Normandy. If the public wanted a true folk hero-singer in '69, they might better have chosen Merle Haggard of Bakersfield, Calif.—son of an Okie who had migrated to California in 1935, a bowlegged bad-boy who had spent seven years in and out of jails including San Quentin, a better singer and a better musician than Cash, a man who writes songs directly from his past ("Mama Tried" and "Mama's Hungry Eyes"), a performer who de-

cides onstage what he'll sing next when he finishes *this* one, a man who really doesn't give a damn about his image, a man who goes on Cash's network television show and engages in this sort of conversation with his idol, Cash, after Cash has finished doing a song from *another* prison album, this one recorded live at San Quentin—

> —Merle, I did that song in my latest album, which we recorded at San Quentin.
>
> —It's funny you should mention that, Johnny.
>
> —What?
>
> —San Quentin.
>
> —Why's that?
>
> —The first time I ever saw you perform, it was at San Quentin.
>
> —Were you—I don't remember your being on that show, Merle.
>
> —I was in the audience, Johnny.

—but Cash got there first, and far be it from Cash to deny the legend that had clouded around him. By mid-1969 he was demanding around $15,000 for a one-nighter ("The Johnny Cash Show," featuring him and June, rockabilly Carl Perkins of "Blue Suede Shoes," the Tennessee Three and Mother Maybelle and the Carter Family), doing an average of 15 of these each month, starring on his hour-long television special over ABC-TV every Saturday night, living in a $250,000 house on a ledge overlooking Old Hickory Lake outside Nashville, cutting songs with Bob Dylan, playing benefit shows at prisons, crusading for American Indian rights and signing a contract with a New York publisher for one of those as-told-to autobiographies. The American public was ready for something real and pure, something more genuine than a Steve Lawrence or an Elvis Presley or a Kate Smith, somebody who would take them back to the *basic* fears and

dreams and values and pitfalls rather than somebody who would sing about pink sunsets and misty memories and romantic love. And there, looking like truth itself, was Johnny Cash.

John R. Cash, actually, born in 1932 at Kingsland, Ark., in the rugged backwoods country some 70 miles south of Little Rock. There were six kids in the family of Ray and Carrie Cash when, in the winter of '35, wiped out by the Depression, they all piled into a truck and, while others in that part of the country were following the handbills to California that promised fruit-picking for all, drove up into the scrubby country of Northeast Arkansas and staked a claim in Dyess Colony. For the next 15 years, Johnny Cash helped his father and his brothers scratch out the land and raise cotton. He didn't get out until he was eighteen, when he joined the Air Force and was sent to Germany (and bought his first guitar), and it was while he had all of the forced leisure time that the military brings that he began plotting a way to get into country music. Coming back to the States four years later, he hung around Memphis trying to get his foot in the door (he enrolled in a radio announcer's school, supporting himself by selling appliances from door to door), and finally, once they listened to him at Sun Records, he hit. "I Walk the Line," which is still one of his trademarks, was recorded in 1956, right on top of the original recording of "Folsom Prison Blues" (which he wrote after watching a movie about Folsom). He was an instant success, writing and singing and drawing top prices for one-nighters, married to an Italian girl from Texas, father of four children, living in California and touring all over the country, but then the bad days came.

To this day, Cash says, there is a lot of it he doesn't recall. To keep up with the pressures he began taking Dexedrine, a stimulant, sometime around 1961. That gave him life. To relax he needed tranquilizers. Suddenly he was helplessly

socked into a vicious cycle of drug addiction, and much of the next six or seven years was spent in a fog. "I would have bet any amount of money that, one, he wouldn't quit the pills," a doctor friend in Nashville once said, "and, two, he wouldn't live this long." Cash and his band (which has remained intact through it all, from the first day in Memphis) began missing dates, and a lot of the dates they *did* make they shouldn't have. "They'd carry around a power saw and a can of black paint," remembers one booker on Music Row, "and sometimes when they checked out of a motel the room would be painted black and the front legs of everything, chairs, tables, beds, would be sawed down a few inches." It got out into the open in October of 1965 when Cash was arrested at the El Paso International Airport with 668 stimulant tablets and 475 tranquilizer pills stuffed in a sock that was hidden inside his guitar. He spent that day in jail and was released on bond, and eventually pleaded guilty and was fined $1,000 for possession of pills he could have had merely on a doctor's prescription. An ugly incident took place shortly after that when the Ku Klux Klan began circulating leaflets telling about Cash's "Negress wife" and their "mongrelized" children and called Cash "scum" (he threatened a $25 million lawsuit against the Klan—"If there's a mongrel in the crowd it's me, because I'm Irish and one-quarter Cherokee Indian"—and to this day bristles at the very mention of the Klan). Still hooked on the pills, he was divorced by his wife of 12 years and then, on a night in a tiny Georgia town in 1967, it all came to an end: Cash woke up in jail and was told by the desk sergeant, a fan, that they had found him stumbling around, near death, and had even thought about giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. It scared the wits into Cash, and that was the turning point for him ("I'm going down to see that man some day and thank him for saving my life"). Only a few months later, in March of '68, he mar-

ried the girl he had been in love with for years, petite June Carter of the Carter Family, in a quiet ceremony at Franklin, Ky.

Cash had been very close for many years to Mother Maybelle and her three singing daughters ("They practically adopted him, back when he was having troubles," says Hubert Long), and so it really wasn't a surprise to Music Row when Johnny and June married and moved into his newly acquired $250,000 "nature house" on the lake near Hendersonville, Tenn., with her two daughters from a previous marriage. June, well-scrubbed, vivacious little "Junebug," a star of the Grand Ole Opry for 17 years herself (she was once married to singer Carl Smith), became a heroine on The Row for the part she played in Cash's life ("Ol' Golden Throat," she calls him). It was a classic show-business marriage, this rough-handed giant of a man (Cash goes 6–2, 250) and the tiny offspring of one of the great families of country music, and almost immediately Cash was back on top of the world: national magazines were hounding him for interviews, "Folsom Prison" was re-released in an album that won Cash not only a Gold Record award but accolades for the album liner he had written himself, television specials were done on him, his price for a concert zoomed to around $15,000 a shot, he became a folk hero to the college and hippie set, he signed on with ABC-TV for a weekly Saturday night prime-time summer replacement show, and he raked in an estimated gross of $2 million in 1969. The black days behind him, he was back from nowhere. "I remember when he got picked up on pills in El Paso and everybody said, 'Well, there it goes, the fans will quit him,' " says Opry singer-comic Archie Campbell, "but, hell, it made a *martyr,* a *hero,* out of him." Says Dick Blake, who books some of Cash's biggest package shows out of Nashville: "Five years ago, if you had a contract with John you'd lay awake at night and sweat; but

now you don't even *need* a contract. And some of these dates he's playing today, he's not even getting paid for. He's still trying to make up those he missed when he was having trouble. That's what kind of guy he is. Now, when he puts on a show, it's such a slick production that you won't be able to find three minutes to go out for popcorn. When he runs a show, no matter where it is, it's a *production.*"

All 13 of the one-hour segments of "The Johnny Cash Show," scheduled as a summer replacement for "Hollywood Palace" over ABC-TV on Saturday nights, were being pretaped during late spring of 1969 at the Grand Ole Opry House, leaving little time for Cash and the rest of the cast to even eat at home. Writers had been shuttling in and out of Nashville for more than a month now, visiting the Cashes at their lake house and writing about the taping of the show and interviewing Cash on everything from why he prefers to wear black to what he thinks of Bob Dylan, and by the end of May he should have been climbing the walls of the Opry House. But Cash seems to have become immune to fatigue, after all these years of having to pick himself up one more time, and with two more shows to put in the can he was in relatively good spirits as he and June grabbed a late-afternoon meal in the Ramada Inn coffee shop before hustling downstairs for a read-through. A week later they would fly off to the Virgin Islands for a two-week vacation, once the taping was finished, and they planned to come back home and stay for a month before hitting the road again.

"Some diet, isn't it?" June was saying to a young songwriter named Mickey Newbury, seated at the table with them.

"Ummph," Cash mumbled, his mouth full of fried potatoes.

"See, when you go on one together, you can quit together."

"Ummph-hummph," said Cash, ripping apart a fried trout,

laughing at something somebody said at the next table where some of the other members of the cast were drinking coffee, then returning to his plate. The conversation had moved around to causes and crusades, and more specifically to Cash's preoccupation with prisons and the American Indian, and Cash was saying, "I didn't go into it thinking about it as a 'crusade.' I mean, I just don't think prisons do any good. They put 'em in there and just make 'em worse, if they were ever bad in the first place, and then when they let 'em out they're just better at whatever put 'em in there in the first place. Nothing good ever came out of a prison. That's all I'm trying to say. If I can get some good done by writing and singing songs about prisons, it's a bonus."

June said, "At Cummins, now, John . . ."

"Where?" somebody said.

"Cummins, in Arkansas."

"The place where they dug up all those skeletons?"

"Yeah, that's the one," Cash said. He had stopped off at the prison to play a benefit, en route to Hollywood to guest on the Glen Campbell show. The prison had made the papers a year or so earlier when news leaked that several skeletons had been dug up on the grounds, touching off an investigation by Governor Winthrop Rockefeller. "Well, see, I said some things during the show, like, here you are wearing old ragged clothes, and everybody's only got one suit to wear, and why don't they take some of that money the state's got and do some things here . . ."

"The Governor was there for the show," June said.

"Governor—"

"Rockefeller, isn't it?"

"Winthrop Rockefeller," somebody said.

"Yeah, well," Cash said, "anyway, after the show the Governor came up to me and said, 'I want to thank you for saying things *I* can't say.' It got in the papers, because they had a lot

of reporters there covering the show, and I heard later they got some things done. That's what I mean. I mean, I'm a musician. But if I can help out a little, well, it's a bonus."

Charley Pride, the only Negro star in country music, came in. He was going to be on the show they were working on. Cash reached across the table and shook hands, then went back to eating. He was asked about his friendship with Bob Dylan (Cash had written the album liner for Dylan's recent album, "Nashville Skyline," which leads off with a Dylan-Cash duet recorded in Nashville, and Cash had once given his guitar to Dylan at Newport). "A lot of writers have just tried to make something out of it," Cash said. "I like him. That's all. He's a friend of mine. He's a good performer, and I like him, and I don't care what he stands for. Some of these writers have said stuff about how it didn't fit, that Dylan's for one thing and I'm for another. . . ."

"How *do* you feel about, say, Vietnam?"

"We're over there."

"Do you support it?"

"I support our Government's foreign policy," Cash said, wiping his hands on a napkin and pushing his plate out of the way now. "I don't know that much about the war. We were over there, and I'll tell you one thing, when you see our boys being brought back in helicopters and their guts spilling out it makes you a little mad about some of these folks back home. The way I feel about it, the only good thing that ever came from a war is a song and that's a hell of a way to have to get your songs. I don't know how patriotic I'd be if I was poor and hungry, though."

It was time to get downstairs and go over the script. The others were getting up and stopping by the cash register to sign for their checks. Cash, wearing a powder-blue one-piece flight suit with his name over the left breast, forever fidgeting, was anxious to get moving. In a playful mood, he began

to sing softly to "I Walk the Line," words he had made up the afternoon before during a break in taping at the Opry House. *I keep my pants up with a piece of twine . . .*

"John," his wife gasped.

"Yes, love," Cash said, getting up and strolling out of the coffee shop, a little-boy grin on his face. *Just say you're mine, and pull the twine.*

JOHN WESLEY RYLES, I

> Q: I've been meaning to ask you something, Johnny. "Kay" is all about a cab driver. Have you ever driven a cab?
>
> A: No, but if this record doesn't sell, I may have to learn how.
>
> —JOHNNY RYLES, ON TELEVISION

Late in 1968, Hank Mills finished writing a song called "Kay" and handed it over to Audie Ashworth, a bright young vice-president at Moss Rose Publications. The lyrics told of a Nashville cab driver who had "sold everything I owned" to bring his girlfriend up from Houston so she could try her luck as a country singer: she makes it big and hits the road, leaving the cabbie to moan, "Kay, I'm living, yet I'm dying, staring out at Music City from my cab." So-called "story" songs have always been standard fare in Nashville, and were bigger than ever at this time, following Bobbie Gentry's smash recording of "Ode to Billy Joe" and Jeannie C. Riley's subsequent "Harper Valley PTA." This one, "Kay," was a classic story song, pregnant with all of the traditional elements: simple words, average people, love gone wrong,

heavy on the irony. Ashworth grabbed it in a minute.

Once a publisher takes a song, the next step is to cut a demo, or demonstration record. A singer and a couple of pickers are run into a studio, a one-take tape is made, a handful of records is pressed from it, and the records are sent out like trial balloons to artists-and-repertoire men around town. Nobody wastes much time trying to perfect a demo, since its sole purpose is to give a rough idea of what the song might sound like if it were produced in living stereo. Ashworth, then, according to form, reserved a studio and corralled some musicians, cranked out a demo of "Kay" and sat back to await the verdict from Music Row.

The next day there was a call from one of the hottest A&R men on The Row, Columbia's George Richey, who had just moved to Nashville after years of successfully producing such artists as Bonnie Guitar on the West Coast. He liked the song, he said, and he wanted to record it. Ashworth asked him if he had a particular singer in mind.

"Not really," Richey said. "Who was that on the demo?"

"Oh, that was Johnny."

"Johnny Riels?"

"Right. We use him on demos sometimes."

"Hell, Audie, let's let *him* do it."

"Are you serious?"

"Sure," Richey said. "I don't think we could improve on the demo."

Great blue-eyed everloving Great American Success Story. Here was seventeen-year-old Johnny Riels of Bastrop, La., being excused from his office chores one morning so he could report to the same studio where Carl Smith and Johnny Cash and Marty Robbins struck gold; the freckle-faced son of an itinerant carpenter being shown which mike to use, a $50-a-week office boy being surrounded by 21 musicians earning $85 apiece for a three-hour recording session, little Johnny Riels singing for Columbia Records. The record took off like

a spooked gazelle. Within eight weeks 100,000 singles had been sold and "Kay" was headed for ninth in *Billboard's* country chart. A girl singer even issued the ultimate flattery with an "answer" song called "John," all about how Kay hears the record and heads home for a happily-ever-after ride in the cab. Columbia's New York office put out a rush order for a follow-up album, smelling a star in the oven. Now Johnny Riels was being called John Wesley Ryles, I ("The jocks would look at the real spelling and pronounce it 'reels' "), menopausing housewives were writing him for romantic advice, and he was ceremoniously stricken from the extra-duty roster at Moss Rose Publications. "John," Audie Ashworth reported, "is a young Glen Campbell." Wow. A star born overnight, a pearl in Moss Rose's oyster, just like in *Country Song Roundup.*

Well, not exactly. The odds on a rags-to-riches story in Nashville are getting longer every day as the competition increases and the listening public sharpens its taste. The trick now is to be ready when the time comes. Few have ever been as ready as Johnny Riels. Make that John Wesley Ryles, I.

Ryles had a career going when he was six years old, singing with his father and his three sisters on a Sunday morning gospel show over KTRY radio in the stenchy paper-mill town of Bastrop, La. When he was eight, the family moved to Fort Worth, and Johnny did an imitation of Jim Reeves singing "Billy Bayou" to win a spot on a country radio show called "Cowtown Hoedown." After a couple of years there he became a regular on another, bigger, weekly radio show called the "Big D Jamboree" in Dallas, where Sonny James and Billy Walker and several other big stars got their start. In between tricks at the "Big D," he played a banjo-and-beer joint in Dallas and toured with a Western swing band called "The Light Crust Doughboys."

It was when he was fourteen, a veteran of four years on the "Big D Jamboree," that Ryles decided he wanted to go to

Nashville. "I didn't know anything about it, really," he says. "I just thought I'd come up here and see what I could do." With no advance contacts whatsoever, he and his father made the long drive to Nashville in the summer of '65 as soon as school had let out. They started knocking on doors, trying to get somebody on Music Row to listen to the tape he had made back home in Fort Worth, but by this time the executives on The Row had perfected the art of being in conference and hiding behind platoons of receptionists and secretaries. One morning, however, a door finally opened for Ryles. Hubert Long took the tape and asked Ryles and his father to come back at noon. When they returned, Long said he wanted to sign the kid to a writer's and management contract. "Man," says Ryles, "that knocked me out. We got in the car and drove all the way back home, and I didn't know where I was at. They put a story about me in the neighborhood paper, and I sat around all winter waiting for something to happen. I finally realized the contracts didn't mean anything unless I worked."

One thing did happen during the winter, though. Long invited him to come to Nashville and work in his office during the next summer at $50 a week, doing everything from emptying trash cans around the office to making an occasional demo for Moss Rose ("I was taking material to the A and R men, too, and by the end of the summer I guess I knew every one of 'em"). He returned home to Texas in the fall to go back to high school, but in January of 1967, the entire family moved to Nashville so he could be close to the action. Johnny's father gave up carpentering and got a job as an "engineer" at the Andrew Jackson Hotel, Johnny entered Nashville's Hillsboro High ("I bombed out with two months to go, and had to graduate in a correspondence course") and took up his former summer job on a full-time basis. Now a regular around Moss Rose, he was doing more demos and trying to write songs and picking up spending money as a

strolling guitarist at an elite restaurant named Mario's. "The music business was really getting to me about that time," he says. "It's kinda frustrating for a person to come to Nashville, you know, and they've got real high hopes and after a while they get to thinking, 'Well, it's hopeless.' But it's not. It just takes a while. And all that time I was getting more experience." Indeed. That was no frightened little boy from Texas who walked into Columbia's Studio A and knocked out a hit on his first recording session. It was somebody who had worked nearly a dozen years to become an overnight success.

Some two months following the release of "Kay," George Richey scheduled a second session for Ryles so they could begin putting down 11 more songs for an album, which would be called either "Kay" or "John Wesley Ryles, I." By ten o'clock on an apple-crisp January morning, Ryles and the sidemen and the engineers were milling around, doing their respective things, in Studio A. As in Ryles' first session, no expense had been spared in quantity or quality: to back him up there were the four-voice Town 'n' Country Singers and three of the best guitars in town, plus a bass, piano, harpsichord and drums. Ryles was already perched on a stool, looking more boyish than he really is in a brown leather vest and long-sleeved button-down shirt and mustard slacks and buckled loafers, his pink face lifted toward a boom mike as he went over the first song they would try to put down. Richey had called in to say he had piled up his new El Dorado en route to the studio and would be a few minutes late. The engineer, Jim Williamson, a laconic man in a loose-fitting forest-green sweater, experimented with the maze of dials and toggle switches inside the control room while the musicians sat on metal folding chairs on the studio floor and worked out their arrangements.

Richey was late, but he was elegant about it. At 10:30 the door to the studio flew open and here came California: royal-

blue double-breasted blazer with silver buttons, shiny white turtleneck with French cuffs, gray cuffless and beltless slacks, all of this embellished with white loafers and piano-keyboard cuff links and jawbone-length sideburns.

"There he is, folks," Ryles said.

"Great way to start a day, huh?" said Richey.

"What happened?" somebody asked.

"I got caught in the middle."

"How much?"

"What's the back end of an El Dorado cost?"

"You can start with two hundred dollars."

Richey seemed relieved. "It could've been worse," he said. "Man, was that woman mad. She talked like she's German or Russian or something, you know? Anyway, she hits me but *she's* going to let *me* have it, so I jump out of my car and run back to her and before she can get in a word I say, 'Are *you* all right?' She melted, man. I swear, she melted." Everybody had a laugh and went back to what they were doing while Richey checked into the control room to see how Williamson, the engineer, stood. He smiled at his micro-miniskirted secretary, then sat down beside Williamson and Ashworth at the control board and began flipping through the latest issue of *Cash Box*. "You want to try one now, George?" Ryles said over the intercom. "I'll call the shots from in here, John," Richey joked as he turned to Ashworth.

"How're we doing?" he said.

"Number one on 'Looking Ahead,'" Ashworth told him. "It looks good."

"Man, we've really got to push on this album."

"How soon?"

"Like, yesterday."

"We shot the pictures for the cover Saturday."

"What do they look like?"

"I don't know. Bill's going to bring 'em over later, after the session."

All during the talk with Ashworth, Richey had been keeping his eyes on Ryles. The boy was ready, and Richey knew it. He had taken him under his wing, and it was another good break for Johnny Ryles, because Richey is a perfectionist with good instincts about his artists. He flipped a switch on the intercom and said, "Okay, you want to do one?" Ryles shot back with "If it's all right with you, George, I'll call the shots from out here." Now Richey *knew* it was time. He called for quiet, began the countdown, and they went to work.

Johnny Ryles has the equipment to take advantage of the new opportunities coming country music's way. Not only has he had a wealth of experience before he is out of his teens, he also has the boyish good looks of a Glen Campbell (there *is* a physical similarity between the two), unusual cool, and an up-country voice that is palatable to the same urbanites who adopted Campbell as their token hillbilly. The first song Ryles was to cut on this session was one he had written (Jack Greene recorded it, to fill up an album, before Ryles had a chance to), a bouncy tune called "We'll Try a Little Bit Harder," and as they went into the eighth, tenth, 12th and 15th takes, pushing to get it down perfectly, the voice of Johnny Ryles began to grow on everybody in the studio. It is a husky, sliding, frog-in-the-throat voice, something like Johnny Ray with the agony turned down. After the 18th take, at five minutes past noon, Richey ordered the tape played back. "Two hours on one song," Ryles said. "George is spending all of my royalties before I get 'em." The sidemen and Ryles stood around like expectant fathers while the tape ran. Richey finally said, "Let's keep it." Quickly they knocked off a song called "Woman, Woman" while the writer, Jim Glaser, nervously looked on from the control booth, and it was all over at one o'clock.

Before going to lunch, Ryles dropped by Richey's blue-appointed office upstairs in the Columbia Records building.

At least two more sessions would be required to get enough songs for the album, but Richey was also looking ahead to a follow-up single to produce as soon as "Kay" peaked out in a couple of months. When Ryles arrived at Richey's office, Ashworth and Richey were already there listening while Hank Mills strummed a guitar and sang a song he had just written and was hoping would be Ryles's next. Mills handed Johnny a mimeographed copy of the lyrics and let him try the song, "Friday Night in Memphis," a story about a boy and a girl in love who are planning to run away from their small Southern town to a new life in Memphis. No wonder. They are, it says in the first line, "of different shades." Richey strongly recommended that Mills do a little more work on the lyrics ("Make it 'different faiths' or something, Hank; man, like, that 'shades' bit would be suicide"). Then Bill Grine, a photographer with a bushy Al Hirt beard, came in with long strips of color negatives for the album cover, pictures of Ryles sitting in a Yellow Cab the previous Saturday afternoon at dusk, and there was a brief but spirited discussion about them ("I don't know, George, do you think they fit my image?" Ryles said). At last the meeting broke up.

The most popular spa in Nashville for the Music Row crowd, because of its proximity and a local delicacy known as "steak 'n' biscuits," is a restaurant several blocks away called Ireland's. At noon and during cocktail hour the place is jammed with a mixture of students from nearby Vanderbilt University and representatives of the music industry ranging from Chet Atkins to eye-batting $80-a-week secretaries. By the time Johnny Ryles got there it was nearly 2:30 and the lunch crowd had abandoned the Blarney Room, leaving only the bartender and two waitresses and a puffy-faced man in a dark-blue suit who had taken up squatter's rights at the bar and kept asking when cocktail hour started. Ryles walked to

a table next to a small stage that held a piano and a microphone.

"Well, well, well," the bartender said, "it's the boy wonder. How ya doing, Johnny?"

"Recovered," said Ryles.

"You boys kinda tied one on last night, huh?"

"Worse than that."

A waitress came over, and Ryles asked her if he could have a whiskey sour. She looked over her shoulder at the bartender. The bartender threw a mock scowl at Ryles, who blushed and swept his hand over the front of his straw-blond hair. The bartender started making a whiskey sour and said, "You're a minor. You know that, don't you?"

"I was a minor last night, too."

"Ginger ale, coming up."

"Right. Ginger ale."

"And go down the street for the next one."

"Right. Down the street for the next one."

The air had gone out of Ryles now. Three hours of being on edge during the recording session had drained him. He wolfed down a plate of steak 'n' biscuits and then sipped on his whiskey sour. "Man," he said, "that doesn't taste so good today."

"You were here last night?" he was asked.

"Yeah. I worked here last night. Couple of nights a week I sit up there on that stool with my guitar and sing from nine to midnight. I wasn't supposed to work last night, but David Wilkins, the guy who was supposed to take it, called and asked if I could sort of fill in for him. I figured I could use the twenty-five bucks and rehearse for the session this morning at the same time. Like killing two birds with one . . ."

"You a singer?" It was the guy at the bar.

"I sing a little," Ryles told him.

"What's your name?"

"Johnny Ryles. John Wesley . . ."

"Never heard of you. Hey. How 'bout singing something for me?"

"No, I . . ."

"Hey, I'm a writer. Maybe I'll write you a song."

"I'm all sung out. I just finished . . ."

"Come on, they'll tell you. I'm Roy Hall. You've heard 'See You Later, Alligator,' haven't you?"

"Well, sure. 'After while, crocodile.'"

"You got it," said Roy Hall. "That's my song. I've written dozens of 'em. Bobby Bare's cutting one of my songs today. Hey, come on, sing for me so I can get an idea of your style."

"Man, I'd like to, but I'm beat. Tell you what, I'm singing here tonight. Nine o'clock."

"Ain't no way. Tonight at nine o'clock old Roy Hall's gonna be sitting in International Falls. If you won't sing for me, I'll sing for you. Get this."

As Johnny Ryles walked out the door of Ireland's into the blinding mid-afternoon sun his head was ringing with the second chorus of "I'm A Ding-Dong Daddy from Dumas," as rendered by Roy Hall on a honky-tonk piano. He was worried about whether he had done the right thing. "Roy Hall," he said. "I sure hope he's not mad at me or anything. I need those writers on my side." Two months later, just as he was leaving to play a giant Sunday concert in London, John Wesley Ryles, I, bought his first Cadillac.

DAYS OF INNOCENCE

> A Hill-Billie is a free and untrammelled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him.
>
> —THE NEW YORK *Journal*, APRIL 23, 1900

Well, maybe the New York *Journal* was right when it became the first to use the word "hillbilly." Most likely the hills were in Kentucky or Tennessee or West Virginia rather than in Alabama, and most likely the *Journal's* man brought a few Yankee biases with him when he came to report this phenomenon from the scene, but you'd really be splitting hairs if you tried to quibble over the description of the nation's most backward citizen at the turn of the century. These were the offspring of the most rugged of the people who had come over from the British Isles on the first boats, and that is damned rugged. Boston and Norfolk and Charleston and Richmond and Philadelphia had been too big for them. There wasn't a city or a town or a village or even a hamlet that could hold them. They were forever cutting out, a step

ahead of "civilization." These boys talked about Savannah, back when it was nothing more than a stockade port town, the same as almost any Southerner talks about the inhumanity of living in New York City today. So they and their ancestors had gone up into the hills of Appalachia, and when somebody followed them they moved over to the next hill. They did, indeed, make their own whiskey and talk like they pleased and fire off their revolvers as the fancy took them. They had no means except a strong pair of hands and a good rifle and a broad back and an overworked mule, and a woman who could cook and have babies, and a God who maybe had a way out of all this if they would pay him homage now and then. These were the boys who carved planting land off the sides of jagged hills. These were the boys who trusted no one. These were the boys who sincerely thought it was a man's right, and also a good way to save money, to make his own whiskey. These were the boys who would later manage to justify slavery on the grounds that without these two-legged animals it would mean the crops would rot in the ground. These were the boys who had chosen the toughest life the country knew, who *wanted* to be alone and on the land and with their own kind of God, who knew how mean life could be but preferred it to the alternative of being around a lot of other people. These were the hillbillies, the people who held onto the old ways longer than anybody else in the country because that was *their* way. These were the poor, white, uneducated, conservative, hard-shell religious, Anglo-Saxon, Southern Appalachian, "free and untrammelled," whiskey-drinking, gun-toting, hookwormed, baby-making, rabbit-hunting Hill-Billies. Over the years, of course, the strain improved. Started voting. For Wallace.

And the old things they clung to included the music their ancestors had brought over from the British Isles. The music was simple and narrative, and it did what music is supposed to do: it took the mind off the miserable and lonely life these

people had chosen, much the same as their religion did, and while they were making the music they were, in a sense, in another world. Once they had settled into the Appalachians, they began adapting the old songs with new words about the events going on around them, fitting the songs to their new surroundings: loneliness, poverty, religious faith, hard work, family life, bitter weather and Mother. There were few instruments, and those were always homemade. The dulcimer and the fiddle, the latter brought into the South by the first settlers, were the most popular in the beginning, and were later followed by the banjo (a Negro invention, popularized in the late nineteenth century), the guitar (late nineteenth century) and the mandolin (around 1900). The music was made for singing, in the distinctive, high-pitched, wailing, untrained Appalachian style, and until the commercial period began in the 1920's it was a highly personal music intended to be played and sung at home or on the village square or at such functions as barn-raisings and picnics and church meetings. This type of music can still be heard on the Grand Ole Opry, in fact, when Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys fly into any of their old songs featuring banjo, mandolin and guitar with the high, nasal harmony that was taught a century ago by singing-school masters who traveled from one valley to another and taught shape-note singing through the church ("shape-note" because the shape of the note, rather than its position on a written scale, indicated its pitch). The church had other influences on what later became country music: songs meant more to the illiterate Southerners than sermons did, camp meetings offered a stage for the music, and the emotionalism of the Southern religion spilled over to the music.

All along, there were other influences working to change the music as the people began moving out of the hills and the tidewaters and the foothills of the South. The Negro, with a music all his own, wrought subtle changes; he taught them

how to pick the guitar rather than merely strum it, and even today there is a term, "nigger-pickin'," denoting the use of the guitar as something much more than an accompanying instrument. The Negro also taught them what is today called "country blues" and has been commercially successful through Negro performers such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and many folk-pop stars of the Sixties. And still other changes were wrought by early industrialization, migration to the cities, exposure to the traveling medicine shows with their Swiss yodelers and black comedians and Hawaiian bands, and the tent shows with their dancing girls and Irish tenors. Once the country boy went back home—from the city, from a medicine show, from a railroad trip, from a jail, from wherever—he took with him new song ideas and new methods for singing or playing them: the yodel, "nigger-pickin'," railroad songs, the blues, the evils of the city, a new appreciation of the old homestead, the influences of jazz musicians he had heard on Beale Street in Memphis. Still, as commercialization lay right around the corner in the Twenties, country music remained distinctive. It was still "country," an honest expression of a distinctive breed, split into two branches: the sad, lonesome, bluesy stuff that had the psychological effect of a good cry; and the spirited, raise-hell-today-for-tomorrow-you-may-die stuff that had come over directly from Scotland and was meant to help a man forget his troubles. When the Twenties came, country music was still holed up in the Southern Appalachians and the Alabama farmlands and the Mississippi Delta and the scrub-pine woods of East Texas. There was no such thing as radio. The phonograph industry and even the sociologists were paying no attention to Southern music, deeming it too crude for serious attention. Now and then a British folklorist would come over and go back into the hills to make note of how many of the old British ballads were still going strong in America. Some American folklorists were beginning to notice, and

write about, this unique music of the Southern white, but getting others interested in it was like spitting into the wind.

The coming of radio and the growth of the phonograph industry in the Twenties, however, was to soon change all of that. By 1922 there were 510 radio stations throughout the country and 89 of them were in the South. Radio meant an outlet for musicians in the South who had, up until then, contented themselves with playing and singing on the front porch or in church or at tent and medicine-show spectaculars. Radio meant, at first, a chance to show the folks what you could do. Then it meant a way to make a living. Then it meant playing what, statistics show, the folks wanted to hear the most. Commercialism, in other words. Atlanta's WSB, the first big radio station in the South and probably the first to feature country music, went on the air in 1922 and has been credited with giving country music its first platform by opening the doors to country fiddlers and singers. Quickly other radio stations around the nation followed suit, and within a matter of five years several stations were sponsoring and broadcasting weekly "barn dances" that surprised even the stations in their popularity (WBAP Fort Worth, which could be heard in Haiti, Hawaii and Canada, received record audience response in 1923 to a 90-minute square-dance-and-country-music show directed by a Confederate veteran). WLS Chicago, WSB Atlanta and, finally, WSM Nashville, with the Grand Ole Opry in 1925, began raking in the dough with regularly scheduled barn dances of the air. By the mid-Twenties it was obvious that there were a lot of people living all over the country who wanted to listen to *their* kind of music.

The phonograph industry saw what was happening and quickly moved to take advantage of it. The record companies had first tapped Southern music when, after World War I, they began recording and marketing records for the South-

ern Negro who had fallen into money by working war plants. In 1923, an outfit called Okeh Records came to Atlanta and set up a studio and recorded a popular Georgia fiddler named Fiddlin' John Carson, who had gotten very big by playing over WSB and stumping with Georgia politicians, and that session is regarded as the beginning of country music's commercial period. Other record companies began piling into the South, often bringing their equipment with them in boxes and recording "on location," as it were. The performers would be paid a flat fee for doing the session, and the gravy, if there was to be any, would go to the company. Fiddlin' John Carson's first recording sold 500 copies in two weeks, moving Okeh to put the record in its pop catalogue and sign Fiddlin' John to an exclusive contract.

After that, with radio shows to be listened to and phonograph records to be bought, stars began to emerge from the front porches and the fields and the courthouse steps and the churches and the tent shows of the South. There was Uncle Dave Macon, a singing banjo player and comic from near McMinnville, Tenn., who was fifty-six years old and ran a mule-train transportation company when he joined the Grand Ole Opry and became its first big star. There was Vernon Dahlart, a Texas-born opera star who switched to country music when his popularity waned and pulled in more than $1 million in royalties from a song called "The Prisoner's Song" (*If I had the wings of an angel/O'er these prison walls I would fly*). There was Carson Robison, a Kansan who had made it as a whistler-guitarist in Chicago and New York but later became perhaps the first professional country songwriter, developing the fine art of writing "event" songs (one of them, about the Scopes Monkey Trial, cautioned Scopes against questioning the old ways). There was, by all means, the Carter Family: the epitome of the religious, Southern Appalachian traditional singing family that had been at the very core of country music in the first place.

The Carters—A.P., his wife, Sara, and his sister-in-law, Maybelle—had come together and were playing as a unit in the mid-Twenties. A.P. (Alvin Pleasant) had been born in Maces Spring, Va., to a hard-core Christian family that wouldn't allow him to own a fiddle, and by 1915 he was married to Sara Dougherty, from Wise County, Va., and they were living in Maces Spring, where, according to scholar Bill C. Malone (author of *Country Music, U.S.A.*), "their home became a neighborhood attraction because of A.P.'s and Sara's singing." Maybelle Addington, also from a small Virginia town, became a member of the family in 1926 and joined the loosely formed group with her banjo, guitar and autoharp. They were playing what they knew, for their own enjoyment and for that of their friends, when a folklorist named Ralph Peer came to Bristol, Tenn.-Va., in August of 1927 to record country musicians on location. For two days the Carter Family recorded for Peer, doing all of their mountain-style harmonizing, and the result was that the Carters set the standards for Appalachian music that are still being copied today. Over the years, the Carters cut more than 300 sides for different companies. Sara would lead the singing, Maybelle would harmonize with her distinctive, quivering, nasal Appalachian tenor, and A.P. would sing a good old-fashioned church bass. Meanwhile, Sara would play the autoharp and Maybelle would accompany in a melodic guitar style she had learned from her brothers (by the next year, every country guitar picker in sight was trying to emulate Maybelle's picking on "Wildwood Flower"). Until 1941 the family played together on Mexican border stations and for recording sessions and on tours in their South, turning down (when they were offered) opportunities to take their music far away from the places they knew best. They were *real*, the Carter Family. Their music, much of it learned in rural churches, changed little in the face of commercial success. They did "Wildwood Flower" as they had always performed

it. Their songs were about Mother and Home and Sin and the Hills and God and Keeping the Chin Up. There were sorrow, death, love, religion and work in their music. There were the same old instruments, like the guitar and zither and autoharp, in it. You did *not* find romantic love or honky-tonking or big-city sin, except from their peculiar vantage point, in the work of the Carter Family, yet their records sold. Maybe that is *why* the records sold.

There would be many others over the years who would try to ape the Carter Family's style of mountain music, and many would make big money from it and would, at the same time, advance America's purest form of native music. But at the same time that the Carters were showing that their kind of music could be both honest and profitable, another purebred white Southerner was firing country music into another orbit and leaving tracks that are still being followed today, some 40 years later. On August 4, 1927, two days after the Carter Family's first recording session, they were followed in the same studio at Bristol by a tubercular railroad man from Meridian, Miss., by the name of Jimmie Rodgers.

SUNDAY IN TATE CITY

> But there is hidden among the mountains of Kentucky, Tennessee and the Carolinas a people of whose inner nature and its musical expression almost nothing has been said. The music of the Southern mountaineer is not only peculiar, but, like himself, peculiarly American. . . . The fiddler or the banjo player is well treated and beloved among them, like the minstrel of feudal days.
>
> —*Harper's* MAGAZINE, JUNE 1904

There is no longer any doubt that the hub of the South is Atlanta (or, as the boys in the boondocks call it, "Hotlanna"). Culturally, racially, financially, architecturally, it has spurted far ahead of the other major Southern cities since 1960. Atlanta has a topflight symphony orchestra and several jaunty young theater groups; Atlanta has major-league baseball, football and basketball; Atlanta has, considering its 45 percent black population, the most promising racial climate in the South, if not the nation; Atlanta has, between the hours of 11 A.M. and 1 P.M., the busiest airport in the world.

The city, the "New York of the South," contains 1.3 million people who work in gleaming skyscrapers and live in dogwood-lined suburbs and drink at the Playboy Club and dine at elegant Southern restaurants such as Justine's (a restoration of an old plantation moved piece by piece from Washington, Ga., 117 miles to the east). Atlanta bears little resemblance to the rest of the South, least of all to the remainder of Georgia. "Atlanta isn't a city," its often embattled liberals like to say, "it's a principality."

And so when you leave Atlanta and head in any direction, particularly northeastward into the Appalachian Mountains, you quickly enter another world. Atlanta clings to the southern ledge of the rugged Appalachian chain, and the roads north quickly begin to take you past dirt stock-car racing tracks and sparkling waterfalls and roadside stands specializing in chenille bedspreads, past cannibalized automobiles and good trout streams and signs that say "Prepare to Meet Thy Maker," through bleak hilltop towns and sweeping green valleys, on and on beyond the tin-roofed chicken houses and the stands of lush pine and the gleaming small-town water towers, onward and upward until Atlanta and the twentieth century begin to seem like parts of a dream. This is liquor-making, chicken-raising, nigger-hating, God-fearing country where bootleggers and car thieves put away law-enforcement agents when they become overeager and where the natives open fire on road gangs when they employ Negro laborers. Electricity came to some sections of the far northeastern corner of Georgia in 1928, to others in 1940, and some people are still trapped back in the distant valleys waiting for it. The people are those classic Southern Appalachians—hillbillies, if you will—whose ancestors came over from Scotland and Ireland some three centuries ago and drifted southward from Canada and New England and Virginia until they finally settled on a lonely life in the Southern

hills where they now hunt and fish and draw welfare and gird for the hardest kind of winter the South can offer.

William Arthur Young and his wife live in the floor of a high mountain valley slightly more than a mile from the North Carolina line, in a community called Tate City. It is not much of a community, Tate City, consisting of the Youngs' shack and another which straddles the valley a few hundred yards away, plus a scattering of rustic summer cabins that have been built recently by people from Atlanta and from Florida. Arthur Young is called the Mayor of Tate City by his friends. He was born at the turn of the century in Newfound Gap, on the Tennessee-North Carolina line in the Great Smoky Mountains. He got an eighth-grade education, which was rare in his time for this part of the country, but then he decided to become a logger like his father. The family moved to Franklin, N.C., stripping the rich timber off the hillsides there, and finally when Young started a family of his own he brought them to Tate City to live in the shadow of mountains with names like Pickens Nose and Chunky Gal and Standing Indian.

Two days after Apollo 8 had returned from its ride around the moon, Arthur Young was working on a friend's truck and his wife was preserving corn in mason jars for the winter when they had a friendly visit from Henry Dillard, an agent for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, who lives in the mountain town of Dillard, about ten miles away on the main road from Atlanta to the North Carolina resort areas. Dillard parked his car on the side of the muddy road beside the Youngs' house and waved to Young, who wore rubber waders and a hunting jacket and a black knit stocking cap. Young started trudging down the road, grinning, spitting tobacco juice and rubbing his two-day stubble of beard with the sleeve of his jacket.

"Came to see if you're making any liquor," Dillard laughed.

"Naw," said Young, "but I been drinkin' a right smart bit."

"Makes good antifreeze, all right."

"Thought I had the flu. Musta drank ten gallons. Told the doctor about it, but he said it warn't do no good."

"What'll you do now?"

"Change doctors, I reckon."

The two shook hands, and then Young invited Dillard into the house. The original structure is a 140-year-old log cabin. The front part of the house, supported by flat rocks stacked like pancakes, was added on about 60 years ago. The porch is fenced in to keep out the dogs and the chickens, who live under the house. The Youngs have no electricity, and their toilet is a frame outhouse that hangs over a hard-running mountain stream behind the main house. Young beat the dogs and the chickens away from the steps, called inside for his wife, opened the wobbly door and showed his friend into a room crowded with overstuffed chairs and potted plants and portraits of Jesus and snapshots of the family. A red-hot pot-bellied "woodsaver" stove dominated the room.

It is not an easy life for Arthur Young and his wife, living like this away from civilization. Their four sons and two daughters have grown up and left home, leaving them to face the bitter winters alone in Tate City. They raise chickens and corn next to the house, and there are several beehives on the hill across the rutted dirt road from the house. They could have a paved road and electricity, Young believes, but he says one of the weekend-and-summer people, a professor from Atlanta, has convinced him that power lines and a paved road would ruin the landscape of the valley.

"The doc likes to come around on Saturday nights and make music," Young was saying.

"Who's that?"

"The professor."

"Does he play?"

"Picks a guitar. Yeah, the doc comes over most every Sat-

urday night when he's here. He'll play the guitar and I'll fiddle a little, and we'll drink a little whiskey and do some dancing. Almost like the old days, but not quite. We used to really have some times around here. Everybody'd bring a fiddle and a woman and a jug of their best whiskey—corn whiskey it was, too—and we'd go to a different house every Saturday night and have ourselves a real time."

"Get their heads messed up," said Mrs. Young.

"The women always say that."

Young excused himself and walked to another part of the house. When he came back he had three fiddles with him. He put two of them on the floor beside the chair and held up the third. It was scarred from years of use, and the broken neck dangled from the strings like a Yo-Yo. He said it was a Stradivarius, passed on to him by his father.

"Been busted near 'bout two year," Young said.

"Your father played the fiddle?"

"Played some."

"He teach you to play?"

"Him, uncles, neighbors. Everybody. Been playing since I was nine year old." He fondled the "Stradivarius," promising himself he was going to repair it one day, then put it aside and picked up one of the others. "Guess I'll have to play this old canestalk fiddle," he said.

"Canestalk?"

"That's about what it sounds like."

Then, on a cold Sunday afternoon in Tate City, Arthur Young began raking a bow across his homemade fiddle, his heavy rubber waders slapping the shaky board floor to keep time, and it sounded more like bagpipes than a fiddle. He played tunes that few people other than he and his wife had ever heard, some of them with titles like "Blue-Eyed Suzie" and "Green River," and some of them with no titles at all. They were songs he had been playing all his life, he said, songs he had picked up from other mountain fiddlers or

songs he had made up himself. His father's ancestors came over from England and his mother's from Ireland, about 300 years ago, and the professor had told him the songs probably came from them and their people. Arthur Young said he didn't know much about that; he just played the songs he knew because he liked them and it was something to do up in the mountains when it was cold and they were weathered in.

When he had played for half an hour, Young put the fiddle away and sank back into the old stuffed chair next to the stove. He took a red tin of Prince Albert from an overalls pocket and began rolling a cigarette. "I'm a little better when I've had some whiskey to limber up my elbow," he said, "but I still ain't no Curley Fox."

"Curley your favorite fiddler?"

"Him and that feller that fiddles for Porter Wagoner."

"Mack McGaha."

"Something like that."

"You must listen to the Opry."

"On that old battery radio on the wall."

"Who're your favorites?"

"Ol' Roy Acuff's one," Young said. "And Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys, they're good. Them and, let's see, that's about the only ones I c'n think of right off. Don't know much about them other fellers they got now. I like the fiddling, mainly. Seems like they don't do so much of it no more."

Dillard had started talking about the flight of Apollo 8, but his conversation with Arthur Young was broken up by Mrs. Young. "They'll tell you near 'bout anything nowadays, won't they?" she said.

"You don't believe it?"

" 'Course not. Ain't a word o' truth in it."

"But Arthur said you heard it on the radio."

"Don't mean it really happened."

"Well, they even had pictures on TV about it."

"Still don't matter," Mrs. Young said. "Lemme ask you something. If they was gonna put men on the moon, how come it don't say nothing about it in the Bible? Now. Show me where it says something about it in the Bible, and maybe I'll believe it then."

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DAYS OF CHANGE

> Nevertheless, the early 1930's witnessed a definite turning point in country music history. Thereafter, the performers tended to be more polished and self-conscious about their commercial status. Jimmie Rodgers' success stimulated hundreds of country performers who, although strongly imbued with the folk tradition, attempted to gain their success through emulation of "The Blue Yodeler."
>
> —FROM *Country Music, U.S.A.*, BY BILL C. MALONE

Recording executives and assorted talent scouts today must lose sleep every time they think about the extraordinary luck a man named Ralph Peer had in 1927 when he packed up his equipment and headed South to Bristol, on the high Tennessee-Virginia border, to record hillbilly talent. Peer had been a recording pioneer, but by this time he had left Okeh Records and gone into business for himself as a publisher and independent producer. When he got into Bristol he ran newspaper ads inviting country musicians to come to town

for auditions that could lead to recording contracts with the Victor Talking Machine Company. He was swamped with replies, of course, just as the fledgling Grand Ole Opry had been deluged with mountain musicians when it went on the air in Nashville. One of the groups was the Carter Family, who came up from Maces Spring, Va., and made their first of many great recordings. And of all the individuals to respond to Peer's call, the biggest was to become the first great singing star in country music: James Charles (Jimmie) Rodgers. They were recorded two days apart, in an old warehouse in Bristol, the first recording sessions of the two biggest early names in country music history. It would be like a baseball scout finding Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays in the same tryout camp.

Like the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers was as Southern as you can get. He was born in Meridian, Miss., in 1897, and when his mother died when he was four years old he had to hit the road with his father, who was an extra-gang foreman on the Mobile and Ohio Railroad. That didn't leave much time for school, but he was going to a school of another kind. He rode the railroads and lived in towns all over the South with his father, coming into contact with the free life and the sordid life and the lonely life. He learned a lot about music from the work-gang Negroes along the way. He saw honky-tonks and hobo camps and train wrecks. By the time he was fourteen he was fully employed by the railroad, and although he had a deep interest in music, he never gave it much consideration as a career until tuberculosis hit him and he had to quit the tough railroad life at the age of twenty-eight. That was in 1925, and when he quit railroading he was already playing with a small band that stuck to waltzes and other dance music for political rallies and picnics around Meridian. Rodgers' first job, once he decided to give entertaining a shot, was as a blackface comedian on the medicine-show circuit playing the Southern mountains. Looking for a

better climate, he and his wife moved to Asheville, N.C., where he put together a band and played briefly on a radio station there. He had been dropped by the station and was working as a city detective in Asheville when he answered Peer's newspaper ad and went packing off to Bristol for that first recording session.

Rodgers had a style about him, and although it was slow going at first (his first royalty check came to $27), he began to pick up a following and was soon invited to Camden, N.J., by Victor for a second recording session that was to spring him into great prominence. It was in Camden that Rodgers recorded his first "blue yodel," a mournful technique derived in part from his listening to the railroad Negroes, and from then on Jimmie Rodgers became the hottest act in country music. For the next six years he set a pattern that is still followed by many of the stars: constantly on the road, playing vaudeville shows and schoolhouses and tent shows and radio, building a mansion for himself and his wife (at Kerrville, Texas, a $50,000 job he named "Blue Yodeler's Paradise," which he had to sell when his medical expenses became so great), singing about the things he knew, like hobos and railroads and sweethearts. He was a frail man with a little-boy grin, and his friends ranged from railroad bums to Will Rogers. His songs were a world apart from the hip country songs of today (one, "Mother, the Queen of My Heart," tells about a guy in a hot card game who turns up the queen of hearts and sees the face of his mother, who had always told him, "Son, don't start drinking and gambling"). But they had such an appeal, even in their most maudlin moments, that Rodgers and his blue yodel and his entire life style were to be aped later by such stars-to-be as Ernest Tubb and Hank Snow and hundreds, or thousands, of others. Early in 1969, in fact, Merle Haggard cut a two-record album of Rodgers songs, called "A Different Train, A Different Time," and it looked like a good bet as the country album of the year.

Rodgers also set another pattern that would become a trademark of many country stars: tragedy. Stalked constantly by tuberculosis, he went to bed in 1933 and, except for a legendary last recording session in New York when he would lie on a cot in the studio between takes, never really got up again. He died in the Taft Hotel in downtown Manhattan two days after that session, and when the train carrying his body pulled into the station at Meridian late one night, the engineer let out a long, low, mournful wail on the whistle. The "Singing Brakeman" had come home.

The way Jimmie Rodgers lived, sang and died left an indelible impression on the country, and on nearly all of the rural musicians who held private dreams of becoming professional entertainers, and his death heralded the beginning of an entirely new era for country music. Rodgers had demonstrated that a country boy, singing about his kind of life, could fall into big money and adulation if he merely learned a few tricks. From the day Rodgers died, then, they started coming out of the woods: country boys, many of them trying to emulate Rodgers' blue yodels, seeking out recording executives and straining for the brass ring. The recording companies began taking closer note of what would sell and what wouldn't sell, helping create a whole new kind of "country music." Folklorists, usually Eastern scholars who had been hooked on the story of Jimmie Rodgers, began making forays into the South to record examples of this "new" music. For the first time, during the Depression, "folk music" became popular in the East and the North when liberals there adopted the songs of the poor South as expressions of the downtrodden common man. Although the sales of all records fell during the Depression (only six million sold in 1932, compared to 104 million in 1927) and many second-rate country musicians were put out of work, country music's

popularity remained high. There have been some estimates that, although record sales in general dropped off tremendously during the Depression, the sale of country records remained on a constant level. It is probably true. A country-music fan, then as now, never needs his music more than when times are bad. The money for a record may have been hard to come by, but the farmer in Alabama and the coal miner in Virginia were willing to sacrifice to get the comfort they could find in a religious song by, say, the Carter Family.

In spite of the Depression, then, country music expanded during the Thirties. Promoters began showing up, setting up road shows and managing musicians on their personal appearances. Radio stations discovered country music and began programming it and sponsoring road shows on the side. A group of "outlaw" stations put up transmitters on the Mexican border, safe from U.S. Government wattage limitations (some of them, it is estimated, poured out more than 100,000 watts), and spread country music—and shady commercials and religious programs and political harangues—all the way to Canada. The musicians themselves got smarter about recording contracts and personal-appearance percentages and songwriting royalties, and some of the stars were demanding as much as $1,000 for a concert even in the late Twenties. Sears, Roebuck and Montgomery Ward were making a killing by selling low-priced country records through the mail to their rural constituencies. New record companies, including Decca, were formed, and took advantage of the country market. Radio barn dances like the WLS Chicago Barn Dance and WSM Nashville's Grand Ole Opry started drawing large radio audiences, and WSM even set up a booking agency to handle tour shows it would send out into the mid-South during the week. Many of today's traditional groups, like the Monroe Brothers (Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys now), got their start during this period. The cow-

boy movies began then, bringing big money to former hillbilly singers such as Gene Autry and Tex Ritter, carrying "cowboy" music even into the nation's big cities.

It was during the Thirties, also, that country music itself underwent great changes. Some migration was taking place, most notably from the Southeastern states into the Southwest and as far as California. In their travels westward, the people came under new influences and their music took on a different flavor. The life in the West was different: instead of jagged hills there were dry plains, instead of Negroes there were Mexicans, instead of church singing there were cowboys sitting around campfires and singing about the prairie, instead of sitting on the front porch drinking moonshine there were honky-tonks. As the Southerners moved West, they ran into railroads, Cajuns, Indians, oil fields, dust storms, gold mining and the misery of life found by those who went on to California with the Okies. The music, in a relatively short period, responded to these changes. Western swing, heavy on the fiddles and made for dancing, developed in Texas, where the Mexican influence was felt. The "honky-tonk" song, loud and wailing and about various types of sin, sprang from the wild and woolly dancing-and-fighting oil-land clubs. Even protest songs entered the picture, however temporarily, through the influence of a wandering Oklahoma minstrel named Woody Guthrie. And there were new instruments and new techniques for playing them: the steel guitar (from the Hawaiian "Dobro"), drums, bass fiddle and electrified guitars (electrified because nobody could hear a regular guitar in one of the noisy honky-tonks). Country singers, because of the new "Western" branch of the music and because of the strong effect of the cowboy movies, were dressing in gaudy cowboy outfits, even if their music didn't have an ounce of cowboy in it and they had never been west of Charlotte.

Changes, sure. During the Thirties and right up to the beginning of World War II, there were plenty of refinements *within* country music. But it was still a regional music contained within the borders of the South and the Southwest, in spite of some inroads in the Middle West. Northern radio stations, except in rare cases, refused to touch it. Ask a guy in, say, Detroit about the Monroe Brothers, and he would have no idea what you were talking about. The recording companies may have been making a good return off their country records, but they still regarded country music as a transitory phenomenon and would record country acts on subsidiary labels and give no thought to trying to sell them outside the South and Southwest. Country musicians were still stepchildren of show business, working for peanuts and playing the rural South and considered as, well, *quaint.* Jimmie Rodgers had spread the word, but not far enough. On the eve of the war, it was still hillbilly music.

As if to pave the way for the dramatic growth of country music during and after the war, an important event took place within the music industry in October of 1939. Up to that point, performing rights and music licensing had been the near-exclusive domain of an outfit called the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers. ASCAP meant popular music: New York, Hollywood, Tin Pan Alley. The organization was, in a sense, controlling America's musical tastes, because if you didn't write the kind of stuff ASCAP liked they wouldn't license you, and so you quit writing songs and thought about getting a job somewhere. "It was a closed shop," says the head of one of Nashville's publishing firms, "and becoming an ASCAP writer was like getting into a fraternity. ASCAP pretty well controlled the type of music you listened to, and since they didn't care much for country music they figured nobody else should either." The fight between America's broadcasters and ASCAP

broke into warfare when it came time to negotiate a new contract between the licensing group and the radio networks. ASCAP told the networks that the rates they would have to pay for the privilege of playing ASCAP songs over the air would amount to $9 million a year, which was twice what it had been on the expiring contract. The broadcasters told ASCAP to go to hell, formed a rival licensing organization called Broadcast Music Incorporated (at a National Association of Broadcasters meeting in Atlantic City, N.J.) and went into a full-scale boycott against playing any ASCAP music on the air. The crunch lasted ten months, and during that period BMI, from a dead start, put together a catalogue of 36,000 copyrighted titles from 52 publishers. Being the only source of broadcast music during the boycott, BMI was able to attract a lot of former ASCAP composers who were out of work. But, most important here, BMI became a sugar daddy to all of those country songwriters who had had to write or play or sing for themselves in the past because there had been no way for them to license their stuff and thereby collect royalties on it. By the time ASCAP and the networks finally got together on a new contract, two months before Pearl Harbor, BMI was off and winging and the ASCAP monopoly on American music had been broken.

"The idea," says Jack Stapp of Tree Publishing in Nashville, "was to let anybody who could write music come in, and it's still that way (with BMI). ASCAP had kept going up and up on its rates, and the stations just got to the point where they said, 'God, how're we gonna make money if we're paying everything for music?' Well, ASCAP is getting a little more liberal about it now, and they have to in self-defense. You could go up to either one of them now and say you're a songwriter and they'd sign you up. I mean, you don't have to take a blood test any more." It seems entirely appropriate that the two most stunning structures on Music Row in

Nashville are the Country Music Association and Hall of Fame Museum and the Broadcast Music Incorporated headquarters, standing side by side at the head of The Row. ASCAP, it must be added, is putting up a fancy new office building in Nashville now.

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HOME ON THE RANGE WITH TEX RITTER

> If the country music industry ever has the opportunity to choose a new addition to the faces on Mount Rushmore, Tex Ritter would probably be the candidate.
>
> —FROM THE *Official Opry History-Picture Book*

Ah, for those days of the cowboy movies. It would be Saturday morning, and, with school out and nothing else to do on the weekend, all of the gang would descend on the ratty little neighborhood theater. Only a quarter to get in, and sometimes a dime if business had been bad. You'd have to get up early to make it, because the lights in the house would go down at ten o'clock for the cartoons. The cartoons were for *kids*, so the first half hour or so was usually taken up with getting situated: breaking out the peashooters, yanking pigtails, going to the rest room, climbing over the backs of seats to get with your pals, trying out these little nickel wax harmonicas, rattling popcorn, spilling Cokes, aping Donald Duck up there on the screen, chanting for the main event to

begin, hiding under the seats from a theater manager who always seemed to be a different one from the one they had *last* Saturday. Finally, though, once the preliminaries were over, the crowd would go into a trance and stay there for the next four hours. A double feature, with a serial thrown in for good measure. Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Bill (Hopalong Cassidy) Boyd, Tex Ritter, Lash LaRue, Al (Fuzzy) St. John. Batman and Robin, the Green Hornet and Superman. *Ah'm gonna git them varmints if it's th' last thang Ah do; but first, Ah'm gonna sing me a song.* Lash LaRue, who wore black and never carried a gun, snatching the gun from a badman's hand with a whip at 20 paces. Gene Autry, who always looked a little bit *too* pretty for a wrangler, breaking out his trusty guitar to give us a few bars of "I've Got Spurs That Jingle-Jangle-Jingle." Tex Ritter, squinting into the sun, singing "Rye Whiskey." Roy Rogers gazing into Trigger's eyes and singing a love song after running down the boys who'd scared the widow out of her bloomers. There wasn't a plot to any of them, but nobody seemed to mind. There was action and horses and six-shooters that would fire 48 times without reloading, and plenty of singing and guitar-picking and now and then a little—*ugh*—prairie romancing. You would go early and then, when the lights went up and they cleared the house for a fresh audience, you would try to hide under a seat so you could see it all over again, for free, until it was time to go home for supper. And you would sit up so close to the screen that it's a wonder no kid ever came out of one of those marathons with powder burns or dusty lungs.

All of this took place between the late Thirties and the late Forties, and you don't see the singing cowboy movie stars so much any more. A higher-grade movie is being made for kids these days, things like the full-length Walt Disney spectaculars, and many of the original prints of the old cowboy flicks have become collector's items for people with nostalgia or people who regard them as pop art, or both. Hoot Gibson and

Fuzzy St. John are dead, along with many of the other old stars. Roy Rogers shows up on television now and then, singing or emceeing a show with Dale Evans. Gene Autry is a millionaire and owns the California Angels of the American League. A couple of years ago, Lash LaRue had a carney blonde on his arm and walked up to a cop in Miami and asked the cop to please shoot him because he'd had enough of wandering around. Indeed, one of the very few of those old heroes still banging away in show business is—*ready?*—Woodward Maurice Ritter. *Tex* Ritter.

Tex Ritter is alive and doing very well, thank you, in Nashville. The 78 cowboy movies he made between 1936 and 1948 seem like ancient history to him, and he has to think awhile to remember the names of any of them. Now he is sixty-five years old, with two sons in college, and he and his wife (a former leading lady named Dorothy Fay) live in a rambling, unpretentious ranch-style home out Franklin Road, near the old Hank Williams homestead. His schedule leaves him little time for reminiscing: playing the Opry on Saturday nights when he's in town, working some 100 one-nighters a year like the youngsters do, raking in royalties from all of the hit songs he has had ("High Noon," "Rye Whiskey," "The Wayward Wind," "Boll Weevil," et al), taking care of business interests (Tex Ritter's Chuck Wagon System, Inc., to name one) and now and then playing cameo roles in low-budget Nashville-produced country-music movies with titles like *Girl from Tobacco Row* and *Nashville Rebel.* He is one of the best-liked entertainers within the Nashville music family, a good-natured old codger with the sonorous voice of an earnest country preacher ("One night I dreamed I'd died, and I'll be a son of a bitch if it wasn't Tex giving my eulogy," said one Opry regular), and in 1964 he became the first living person to be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame alongside people like Jimmie Rodgers, Fred Rose and Hank Williams. He has, in fact, served

two terms as president of the Country Music Association, the thinking being that if Tex Ritter couldn't add a little class to country music with his lordlike voice and Rock of Gibraltar carriage, *nobody* could. He is, more or less, the father figure of the Grand Ole Opry.

Although Ritter was well educated and had a broad musical background by the time he started making movies and singing for a living, his upbringing was similar to that of the other movie cowboys and country singers of his era. He was born in 1905 in a town called Murvaul, Panola County, East Texas, seven miles of trails and dirt roads from the county seat, Carthage. "I guess my little section of East Texas was possibly the last place in the country that had an automobile," he recalls. Mr. Ritter, who was forty-eight when Tex, the youngest of six kids, was born, used to talk about how he "would ride horseback for two days and a night and carry his own fiddle for square dancing" in surrounding towns. But Panola County was conservative country ("very good people, but with a very deep Tennessee heritage") and when Tex was a kid there, they didn't cotton to things like square dancing and card-playing. "I remember, we had a traveling salesman staying with us one time—they used to, because we lived the closest to the railroad—and after he left they found some playing cards. I guess the fella was bored to death, and he'd probably been playing solitaire. Anyway, word got around and I remember some of the neighbors saying, 'And he seemed like such a *nice* boy, too.' See, the church had a great influence. They were 100 percent sure of hell's damnation." So young Woodward Maurice Ritter had to settle for singing in the church choir as his earliest musical training, and it was not until the family moved to Nederland, about ten miles from Beaumont, *the big city,* that he began taking voice lessons and dabbled with the trumpet and the guitar. Even then, however, he had his mind on becoming a lawyer (he graduated as the top student in his high-school class).

He went on to the University of Texas, where he got hung up on the history of the Southwest and the development of cowboy ballads, and he *still* wanted to become a lawyer, until the Depression hit and he had to go to work.

The search for a job took him to New York, and it didn't take him long at all to get his break. In 1931 he played the part of a cowhand and sang four songs in a Broadway play called *Green Grow the Lilacs,* which later became *Oklahoma.* He started hitting the Eastern universities and lectured on cowboys and cowboy music. Over the next three or four years, Ritter became one of the first cowboy radio stars: star of WOR's "The Lone Star Ranger," co-star of a highly popular children's radio show called "Cowboy Tom's Roundup," emcee and featured singer on the WHN "Barn Dance."

Meanwhile, in Hollywood, Gene Autry had kicked off the singing cowboy era. Ritter was signed to a contract in 1936 and was shoved onto the merry-go-round of cowboy movie-making. "We were never too conscious of the names when we were making the Westerns. Sometimes we'd just have a working title like 'Ritter Number Four' or 'Autry Number Seven.' See, you had to clear the titles, and they were turning 'em out so fast that you didn't know until the last minute what the title would be. The buyers bought 'em for the star, anyway, not the name. You bought eight Rogers pictures, eight Autrys, eight Charlie Starretts, eight Tex Ritters. We'd go out there and film all day, and we didn't have any idea what the film was all about. They'd say, 'Sing such-and-such,' and I'd sing it. Then we'd ride into the sunset a few times, then we'd chase after some outlaws for a while. It wasn't until I saw the movies in a theater that I knew what it was we were doing when we filmed 'em." Nevertheless, for seven years Tex Ritter was ranked among Hollywood's "top ten best money-making" stars, and, more important to him, the movies were great vehicles for pushing his recordings. By

1943, he had hit with "Rye Whiskey" (which had done nothing when he first cut it in 1933 but took off after he sang it in his first film, *Song of the Gringo*), and he signed with Capitol Records as the first recording artist under Johnny Mercer's new label.

By the time cowboy movies died out, Ritter didn't need them any more. Say what you want to about the tone and the range and the general quality of his voice, a flat bass monotone that one Nashville artist describes as "early foghorn," but it *is* distinctive—so distinctive, in fact, that it is difficult to imagine anybody else singing "High Noon" or "Boll Weevil" or any of the other patented Tex Ritter ballads. If you've got the singular style, you can make a song out of almost anything, witness a recent release called "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Miami": Ritter was on a plane that was hijacked and forced to land in Havana, and when he got back to Acuff-Rose Publications in Nashville and sat around talking about the experience, he was talked into making a song out of it. One time, in 1944, the top three records on *Billboard*'s "most played jukebox folk records" chart were Ritter's. His singing of the title song for the movie *High Noon*, which won an Oscar for Gary Cooper, also won an Oscar for the picture's musical score in 1952. And over the years, Ritter has been credited with discovering such country stars as Hank Thompson, Jim Reeves, Jan Howard and Moon Mullican. So he must be doing *something* right.

The old boy is doing all right for himself in Nashville now, and that's a fact. For several years he had been living on the Coast, or at least maintaining a residence there for his wife while he toured and played the Opry, so it made a lot of sense to him about three or four years ago to go ahead and move to Nashville "where most of my friends are, anyway." When he first came, he and veteran Opry announcer Grant Turner co-hosted WSM's nightly Opry Star Spotlight records-

and-interviews show, but the hours were bad and Tex had a lot of other things going, so he quit. Now he hangs around Acuff-Rose and the Opry House, tours, speaks for the country-music industry and occupies his mind with the issues of the day. Like, for instance, the Christmas gift his son, a student at Berkeley, had just presented him. A copy of *Soul On Ice,* by Eldridge Cleaver, the Black activist. Him, Tex Ritter, from Murvaul, Texas, getting a book like that from his own son. Tex Ritter, raised in East Texas where they prayed for anybody caught with a deck of cards. Tex Ritter, who got a personalized invitation to the inauguration of Richard Nixon. Tex Ritter, who recorded a patriotic album called "Sweet Land of Liberty" and a religious album called "Just Beyond the Moon" and a single called "The Pledge of Allegiance." *Tex?*

"The boy *writes* well," he was saying.

"Who?"

"This Cleaver."

"Oh."

"Yeah, and he gets down to the nitty-gritty, all right."

It was a Friday morning, getting close to noon now, and Tex Ritter was sitting at the glistening mahogany table in the dining room of his home in Nashville, being served coffee and cake by a Negro maid who wore a crisp black uniform. Neither the house nor Tex were fancied up with an excess of cowboy trappings, as one might have expected. There was an occasional animal-skin rug on the floor or a set of horns on the wall, and Ritter looked more like a dressed-up farm-implement salesman in his charcoal-gray suit and black coat sweater and a pair of high button shoes he had inherited from a recent low-budget movie in which he had played the part of a preacher. For some inexplicable reason, the maid had the shakes. Whenever she would come in to pour more coffee, there would be a great clattering as she lifted the dainty china cup and saucer off the table and poured the

coffee and then tried to set it all back down on the table without an incident. Tex had been telling how one of his sons had gone to the Democratic convention in Chicago and had bumped into the same set of "rabble-rousers" he had seen at Berkeley and at a "revolutionary training school" in Kansas.

". . . And of course he saw the riots and everything. Now. The same cats that he saw making the talks out there in Kansas were the same guys that he saw in Chicago and the same guys he saw in Berkeley. Hell, I know their names, or did know 'em, ah, Rubin? He was one, and the guy that married—" The maid, rattling cups, trying to avert disaster. "Hello, how ya doin'?" An embarrassed laugh, more clattering.

"Mary, would you like a drink of whiskey to soothe your nerves?"

"No, sir, I don't drink."

"Whatsa matter'th you?"

"Looks like when I gets ready to set th' cups down—"

"Just like I am, gettin' old, aren't you?"

"That's right." Exit the maid, giggling, obviously one who never really knows for sure how many grains of salt she should take with Mr. Ritter's patter.

"So, ah, the same guys," Tex went on, "what was it, Rubin? The one that married Joan Baez, he's the student body president at Stanford, this cat, what's his name? That one, that married Joan Baez. And this one kid has been in Hanoi more'n he's been in Washington, that one. You see what I mean? Well, you know they're Communists, 'oddammit, they got to Chicago with something like $10,000 in their pockets, you know, money's coming from somewhere for these kids. Up in Washington the other day, you wouldn't believe it. You'd walk along the streets and you'd run into a bunch of 'em. Awful. Girls, look like sixteen, with these bearded colored— Well, there again I may be prudish, but you see that is what eventually they want, frankly. The sex has to be in it,

too, for it to be a true society, which, to me, that's destroying your race. Oh, God, they looked terrible, boy, you wouldn't believe it."

Which brought him back, full circle, to Eldridge Cleaver and Norman Mailer and the new morals and protest and all of the other things happening today that are so far away from Tex Ritter's time and place of 50 years ago. "But, ah, I don't feel that you need all those words. Cleaver, and this Mailer. Mailer, he's a weirdo from the word go. Well, so it's the age of realism. Fine. I think the kids of today have taught us honesty, if nothing else. I don't know, what the hell, they have no *answers* for anything, but at least they're sincere in what they believe. But why revert to all of it? Why just go around naked? Like the kid in England [Beatle John Lennon] and his wife showing up naked on that album cover. Why? We had all of that. We had all of that before we passed from the Dark Ages into the Age of Enlightenment. As far as the little miniskirts, that part's all right. But as far as some of the words used in Cleaver's book—shit. I'm not expressing myself too well, about to sound like a damn fruit, but there's one boy in town that writes kinda gutty stuff. I remember he wrote one about the neon lights and the guy gets him a bottle and he's driving around the motel 'cause his wife is in there with another guy. Well, so it happens. So it's realistic. The rock 'n' roll kids, the folk-rock, they're taking care of all the protest stuff. You see, I don't want country music to fall into all of *that.* I don't mind to sing about mother and home and flag all of the time. Sing about the back-street affair, naturally, and tell it like it is, get down to a little nitty-gritty. But I hate to see us fall into this category, and it looks like we're headed a little this way. Country music has always been a rather, a wholesome kind of music, and I would hate to see it go the other way. It's already happening, you know, the suggestiveness, the *dirty*—I find a little suggestiveness in this 'Harper Valley PTA,' for instance.

But, of course, the public liked it. Made a lot of money. Tremendous seller. Put Shelby Singleton in business, getting so damn many people over there, I guess he—but you see, I don't want to appear old-fashioned, but . . ."

The phone rang, and the maid answered the extension in the kitchen. Long distance for Mr. Ritter. Tex, squinting like you've seen him do a thousand times in the old movies, said, "Where from?" She went back to the phone and then came back and stood in the doorway and said, "Cleveland, *O-hye-o.*" Tex stayed in his chair at the end of the dining-room table and deliberated over the name and the city, as though he had just learned the Dalton Gang was back in town and had been asked what he planned to do about it. He eased up, sauntered into the kitchen, talked with the man a few minutes and came back and sat down again to a fresh cup of coffee. "They want you to make these TV pilots, you know, and they don't even offer you scale. In our business they always offer you, well, 'For the good of the industry.' " Obviously, Tex Ritter, on this week of his 65th year, figured he had done enough good for the industry. Besides, he had a lot of road between him and the next few days. He would get in a car the next morning on a short tour that would take him to Jackson, Miss., and Memphis and Des Moines for successive one-nighters. And today, today Tex Ritter had to go downtown and get a haircut.

DAYS OF DOLLARS

> The war is when the change started. Every Saturday night I'd go over to Fort Jackson, S.C., to produce a country show, and after the show I'd walk around the camp and no matter where I went I'd never leave the Opry. The Opry was on every radio in every barracks, and there wasn't any way these kids from New York and New Jersey could get away from it. It had to rub off on 'em.
>
> —JACK STAPP, TREE PUBLISHING, NASHVILLE

It is symbolic that the original Carter Family, straight out of the hills and singing the only kind of music it knew, quit recording in 1941 as World War II began. The retirement of the Carters (it is the survivors who have made a comeback on the Johnny Cash show) signaled the passing of one era and the beginning of another. The war brought about great changes to this country and, resultantly, to country music. The war brought together Southern boys and New Jersey boys at places like Fort Jackson and Fort Benning and the other military training camps, most of them located in the

South. The war also sent Southerners into the East and to the West Coast to work in defense plants. There was a great mixing of people, of course, and when a Southerner left home he took with him his music. Jukeboxes in Los Angeles, for example, were being stuffed with country records. By 1943 the Special Services Division in Europe included at least 25 country bands. The radio barn dances, like the Grand Ole Opry and the WLS National Barn Dance, were sending out road shows to military camps. During the height of the war, according to a survey done then by *Billboard,* 198 of the total of 608 recording artists in the United States were country performers. The big stars were people like Roy Acuff and Ernest Tubb and Bob Wills—strictly country—and they were leaning hard on themes about Mother and Patriotism and Home. And these stars could be heard, on any Saturday night when they weren't on the road somewhere, picking and singing over WSM Nashville's Grand Ole Opry.

The story of the Opry is one of the great stories of show business, and it is impossible to imagine country music without the Opry. Every Saturday night, over WSM's clear-channel 50,000 watts, the five-hour Opry performance is broadcast live from the old red-brick Grand Ole Opry House in Nashville and goes to every state in the nation. Some 60 country musicians are carried as regulars on the show, meaning they must play at least 20 Saturday nights a year (for union scale, which amounts to only $44 for a star who might be pulling down $1,500 anywhere else in the country), and they all come together in what amounts to an old-fashioned music festival. The Opry House can seat only 3,600 at a time, and in the busy months there is one show on Friday night and two on Saturday in addition to the Saturday matinee. Opry fans are as dedicated as Brooklynites used to be about their old Brooklyn Dodgers. They come in from an average distance of nearly 500 miles, take guided tours around the city during the daytime to see the Country Music Hall of

Fame and some of the stars' homes, and begin lining up out front two and three hours before the first Opry performance to be sure they get in (the Opry is sold out two months in advance during the warm months). Once inside, they sit in scarred church pews and wave funeral-parlor fans and cheer their favorites on as though it were a bullfight. They are white lower-middle-class people who drive trucks and keep house and work in factories, and most of them are somewhere between thirty and forty-five years old. Their politics is simple and conservative, and in '68 they were voting Wallace. They have been among the 10 million Opry radio listeners for years, and most of them have been saving up their money for a long time to get to Nashville for the Opry. It is, for fans and performers alike, the end of the rainbow.

The Opry began in 1925, a month after the National Life and Accident Insurance Company of Nashville had opened WSM. The station had hired a former Memphis newspaperman, George D. Hay, as program manager. Hay had fallen in love with country music, and he had the idea that the music would attract listeners in WSM's coverage area. So, on a November night in 1925, Hay sat an old mountain fiddler named Uncle Jimmy Thompson in front of a carbon microphone and let him saw away for more than an hour, and that was the beginning. The weekly program was dubbed Grand Ole Opry shortly after that when Hay came on to introduce the show following a program of grand opera music and took a shot at the preceding festivities: "For the past hour we have been listening to music largely from Grand Opera, but from now on we will present 'The Grand Ole Opry.'" For many years after that, Hay would open the Opry broadcast by blowing on a steamboat whistle which had come to be his trademark. Anyway, the Opry was a hit from the very beginning and was forced to move into several larger houses over the years until it finally landed in Ryman Auditorium, in downtown Nashville, in 1941, and there is another story for

you. Ryman Auditorium (the name was changed to Grand Ole Opry House when National Life bought the building a few years ago) was built in the late nineteenth century by a colorful old riverboat operator-gambler-entrepreneur by the name of Captain Thomas Ryman. The captain was a swinging soul who ran floating dens of iniquity up and down the Cumberland River, but one night he and some of the boys roared into the tent meeting of an evangelist named Sam Jones and, the legend goes, Captain Ryman was brought to his knees with a sermon regarding Motherhood. Ryman went back to his boat, threw everything overboard, and vowed to return the favor to his favorite preacher—the upshot being a then graceful tabernacle, Ryman Auditorium. Even today, the hulking old building with its stained-glass windows and church pews has a religious air about it—another reason the Opry is called the Mother Church of country music. And on the July Fourth weekend of 1969, 12,000 worshipers came for the Friday and Saturday shows.

When the war ended, then, the Grand Ole Opry had become an institution and country music had branched out to the point that it was experiencing its broadest interest. The music had always been strong in the South and the Midwest and the Southwest, of course, and it was still strongest in those sections; but now those people had more money than they had ever known, and their love of the music had also rubbed off on the non-Southerners they had met during the war years. The immediate postwar years saw the first signs of what was to happen later to the country-music industry: at least 65 recording companies were producing country records, some 650 radio stations were programming country programs (and at better hours, too), New England became the target of touring country package shows, Opry units were playing Carnegie Hall, and regional barn dances of the Opry ilk were opening up in places like Dallas and Shreve-

port and Los Angeles. In a matter of less than ten years, dating it back to the founding of Broadcast Music Incorporated, country music had become an industry rather than simply a way for a burned-out farmer to keep the blues away. These were the years when it became possible for a country boy to bum a ride to Nashville and get an audition and suddenly find himself riding around town in a Cadillac, the hero to millions of people, the stereotype of the lonesome hillbilly singer. The years, for example, of Hank Williams.

If Jimmie Rodgers was the first big solo singing star in country music, then Hank Williams was the second—and much more fortunate than Rodgers in that he came along when the nation was hungry for entertainment and had the money to pay for it. Williams was born on a tenant farm in Mt. Olive, Ala., in 1923, but was raised near Montgomery. He had to shine shoes and sell peanuts and newspapers on the streets of Montgomery to help out the family, and when he wasn't doing that he was singing or playing music. Typical of so many country musicians, the strong early musical influences he came across were the fundamentalist churches and the Southern Negro street singers. When he was twelve, he won an amateur-night talent contest by singing a song he had written. When he was thirteen, he formed his own country band. When he was fourteen, he got a job singing over WSFA in Montgomery and began playing medicine shows and anywhere else they would let him. By 1946, when he was twenty-three, he was in Nashville and was writing songs for Acuff-Rose Publications and doing some recording. Nothing big was happening yet, but that came soon enough. In '49, Williams recorded "Lovesick Blues," a country-blues classic that dates back at least to 1925 when it was done on the pioneer Okeh label. Williams, lanky and hungry and possessing more white soul than any one man should be allowed to have, took a half-dozen encores the first time he sang the song onstage at the Opry and the record fixed things so he

would never again have to worry about money. He began grossing $200,000 a year, and he was one of the biggest names in *any* branch of music. But another side of Hank Williams was his personal life, which added to his mystical appeal but eventually destroyed him. He had trouble in marriage. He had physical problems. He drank and took pills in attempts to solve both of those problems. He was the picture of a lonely, tortured country boy with money but not happiness, and it all came to an end on New Year's Day of 1953 when he was found dead from a heart attack while being chauffeured to a performance in Canton, Ohio. His funeral, in Montgomery, drew some 20,000 fans and stars to the municipal auditorium near where he had hawked peanuts and newspapers some 20 years earlier. To this day, royalties from his songs are coming to some $100,000 a year and many of those songs have become classics. And one of the newer young stars out of Nashville is Hank Williams, Jr., twenty-one, who sings just like his old man and keeps the legend alive: on tour, he will sing a Hank, Sr., medley while his father's face is shown on a screen in the darkened auditorium; and one of the smash country albums of 1969 was called "Songs My Father Left Me," Hank, Jr., singing the songs Hank, Sr., had written and left in a shoebox just before he died. "I'm haunted," says Wesley Rose of Acuff-Rose, whose father worked closely with Hank, Sr., "every time I see that boy walk in the door."

When Hank Williams died, his kind of music was a symbol of the country music that was most popular at that time. The music was typified by a nasal singer and a whining steel guitar and honky-tonk lyrics, and the stars were people like Webb Pierce and Ernest Tubb and Roy Acuff and Faron Young. These stars had been heavily influenced by Jimmie Rodgers or Hank Williams, and they were making big money

by cutting pure country records and playing one-nighters in the boondocks for what was primarily a middle-aged, middle-class Southern audience. Nashville, by the early Fifties, had established itself as country music's spiritual headquarters and business was booming. There was little experimentation with the music, although some singers—notably Eddy Arnold, a country boy who had once clowned around in a checkered suit with the Pee Wee King band—had managed to take some of the corn out of the music and had begun reaping royalties from pop charts. Country music was sailing right along, doing its own thing, having a ball, until—*Elvis.*

Rock 'n' roll changed everything, of course. Or, at any rate, the forces that rock 'n' roll represented changed everything. Rock sneaked up on everybody and hit before anybody realized what was going on. What was going on was, the kids were taking over. Until the Fifties, a teenager had stayed in his place. No money, no rights, no nothing. Go to school, mow lawns, in by ten, graduate, don't smoke, marry a *nice* girl, get a *nice* job, talk *nice,* join the Rotary, shut up, have babies, have grandchildren, collect social security, die. Big deal. You had Korea now, the first of the lousy little wars. You had the atom bomb now. You had the fallout from World War II, which meant unprecedented affluence and more liberal morals and the gnawing thought that maybe the world *won't* go on forever. It marked the beginning of an era that only now is coming into full blossom: an era in which the majority of Americans are below twenty-five years of age, an era that finds nudity in clubs and on movie screens, an era where marijuana is likely to be legalized, an era where any high-school girl who hasn't been laid by her junior year gets funny looks, an era where baseball and Old Glory and the Lions Club and crewcuts and apple pie have gone out of style, an era where sixteen-year-olds set clothing fashions for the whole world, an era where the old man is a fink. In the

Fifties, in other words, the kids took over. And their leader was a snarling ex-hillbilly musician by the name of Elvis Presley.

The term "rock 'n' roll" had been first used in 1951, but it was around '54 when the music reverberated across the country and nearly wiped out everything else. It was, technically, a blend of country blues and boogie and jazz and gospel and what was called, in the South, "nigger music." Realistically, it was teen soul. Elvis Presley had been raised on a farm near Tupelo, Miss., and had known them all. He was country, Negro, jazz, blues, gospel, all of them rolled into one. He thumped a bass fiddle onstage at the Opry at one point, and wailed Assembly of God songs back home at another point. When he went to Memphis in 1954 and got a recording contract with Sun Records, after hacking out a living as a truck driver, he recorded a sort of country-jazz-gospel-nigger-good ol' boy-race-blues number and the world was ready for him. Elvis was saying to hell with Korea and the old folks. He was saying groove it because tomorrow you may die. He was right there on "The Ed Sullivan Show," wearing black leather, making love with his guitar, sneering at the folks, *bawawawawawaw*-anging all of those watts through an amplifier, being preached about on Sunday, having his clothes torn from him in Chicago, *taking over.* And these kids, the ones who had all of the money for things like records and transistor radios and black leather jackets and electric guitars, bought him. And a guy named Harold Jenkins, who had led a hillbilly band called the Cimarrons while he was in the Army in Japan, came home and heard this Presley, who had come from only 40 miles away from *his* hometown of Friars Point, Miss., and changed his name to Conway Twitty and went rock 'n' roll and hit the road in search of *his* fortune. And the others, many of them former country musicians, quickly fell in line: Bill Haley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, Johnny Cash, Buddy Holly, the Everly

Brothers. *What in the world is going on here?* Roy Acuff had to be asking himself as he broke into another chorus of "Wabash Cannonball" at the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday night. Acuff, Hank Snow, Ernest Tubb and Webb Pierce were still singing about Mother and Country, still playing Keokuk and Tupelo and Waterloo, still beating their brains out at the Opry, but after a while they had to see what was happening. Gut-bucket country wasn't cutting it anymore. You had to go to the kids, because they sure weren't coming to you. *Throw that heavy-bottom bass in there, Cash. Sing about a white sport coat and a pink carnation, Marty. Hell, how* come *we can't take a drum onstage at the Opry? How* come *we gotta wear them goddam cowboy suits?*

And that, if you want to have it all stuffed into one bag, is where it happened. Before anybody knew it, a country singer named Sonny James, from Hackleburg, Ala., was becoming the first to make it to the top of the pop charts with a song called "Young Love"—not a country song, not rock 'n' roll, but the kind of stuff *the kids* wanted, and paid for. After a stiff fight, they fixed it so a guy could go onstage at the Opry with a snare drum (*if* he stood while he slapped it, and *if* the drum was on a tripod). The music began to broaden to the point where the ones who were making the really big money were the ones who could sell to the kids. Webb Pierce and Lefty Frizzell faded into the background, and whenever anybody like that *did* get big it was because the kids regarded him as camp, as a folk hero, as something from a different time. And it was only when the people in Nashville recognized the kids, saw the trend, that country music came back from the dead. The number of country radio stations, the number of *any* kind of radio stations except rock 'n' roll, had tailed off alarmingly until, in the early Sixties, all of America's popular music came around and acknowledged *the kids.*

Perhaps nowhere is all of this more obvious than in the comparison of two different generations' treatment of the

hobo song, a traditional country favorite. Jimmie Rodgers was the first to go heavy on hobo songs, and his hobo was the mistreated and wandering poor white who was just looking for a home, just an old boy down on his luck, a boy from Mississippi who had been thrown to the wolves and was thinking about Mama more than anything else. And then, nearly 40 years later, came Roger Miller, a young cat from a different generation whose hobo was a don't-give-a-damn punk who takes it all in stride.

Jimmie Rodgers' hobo:

Will there be any freight trains in Heaven,
Any boxcars in which we might hide;
Will there by any tough cops for brakemen,
Will they tell us that we cannot ride . . . ?

Roger Miller's hobo:

Old stogies I have found,
Short but not too big around . . .
I'm a man of means, by no means,
King of the Road . . .

A SHOESHINE FROM DEFORD BAILEY

> That brings us to DeFord Bailey, a little crippled colored boy who was a bright feature of our show for about fifteen years. Like some members of his race and other races, DeFord was lazy. . . . He was our mascot and is still loved by the entire company.
>
> —FROM *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry,* BY GEORGE D. HAY

Young Jimmie Rodgers, on the way to becoming the "father of country music," learned to play the banjo and the guitar from work-gang Negroes in the railroad yards of Meridian, Miss. Bill Monroe, the "father of Bluegrass," got most of his early training by hanging around Negro laborers in Western Kentucky. Hank Williams, the very prototype of the lean and lonesome Southern hillbilly, was taught guitar by an old Negro street singer in Montgomery, Ala. Chet Atkins, "Mister Guitar" of country music, adapted his style from Merle

Travis, who got his from a white coal miner, who got his from a Negro. Bill Haley was just another guy with a hillbilly band until he took another look at what was called "race" music and recorded a song entitled "Rock Around the Clock" in 1954 to touch off the rock 'n' roll era which still affects Nashville. The influence of the Negro on country music has been considerable over the years, for obvious reasons. In the beginning, country music belonged to the poor white rural Southerner and "soul" or "blues" belonged to the Negro. Living side by side in the South, their hopes and fears and joys and failures essentially the same, it was natural that they would share musical tastes and borrow from each other. Today there are great similarities between "country" and "soul" music, the most apparent being the heavy beat and the simple lyrics, and now Nashville has taken the best of both worlds by creating "country soul."

But country music is still the white man's world. The Negro showed the white Southerner what he knew, but when the lessons were finished whitey cut out for Nashville so he could ponder, at a safe distance, what the niggers were up to. The only black faces you'll see in the audience at the Opry or at a country concert belong to students who have come to write about it or militants who want to see if they can whip up the rednecks. During the 1968 Presidential campaign, Music Row was practically a battlefield command post for George Wallace, who drew supporters there while he ran (Hank Snow and Doyle Wilburn, of the Wilburn Brothers, both stood up for George on a paid national telecast) and mourners when he lost ("Just think, he'd have been the biggest country-music fan we ever had as President," said Lou Stringer, who runs a small music-publishing company and once moonlighted as a weekend preacher). Generations of Southern demagogues have stumped, as Wallace did, with country bands to warm up their all-white

crowds; and when conservative Preston Smith took over as Governor of Texas in January of '69 he turned down Carol Lawrence and Robert Goulet in favor of Buck Owens, Glen Campbell, et al, as his Inaugural Day entertainment. One of the few notable liberals in Nashville, in fact, is Chet Atkins; but then, he reads a lot and buys things from Pakistan.

It isn't surprising, then, that there is only one black man in country music today worth mentioning: Charley Pride, a strapping, handsome, sufficiently dark young man who grew up listening to the Grand Ole Opry every Saturday night in Sledge, Miss. Pride gave professional baseball a shot (two weeks of spring training with Gene Autry's Los Angeles Angels in 1961) and spent five years singing in clubs in Montana before singer Red Sovine talked him into going to Nashville. It looked like the gimmick to beat all gimmicks ("Come on, you gotta hear my nigger," one A&R man was told) until Chet Atkins heard Pride and put him on record. Pride's manager was so sensitive about the "gimmick" charge that he waited until his boy's records were hitting before he put out publicity pictures or otherwise admitted he was black ("Can you imagine the looks on some deejays' faces," chortles another resident of Music Row, "when this big buck walked in and stuck out his hand and said, 'Hello, I'm Charley Pride'?"). Now Pride is RCA Victor's hottest property, country or pop, and enjoys a big following among the Segs because, for one thing, he has the good sense (and guidance) to make light of his shading. "Everywhere I go, people want to know two things," Pride says to audiences when he is performing. "They want to know, 'Charley, how did *you* get into country music?' and 'How come you don't talk like you *supposed* to?' " He is promoted as Country Charley Pride, and there might be something to the suspicion that he is Nashville's house nigger (he lives in Dallas, actually) if he didn't sing "Kawliga" better than Hank Williams did. Maybe he's

just hanging around to remind everybody where Hank learned to pick the guitar.

Then there is the other Negro in country music's life, the "little crippled colored boy," DeFord Bailey, whose story is not nearly as pretty as Country Charley Pride's. Bailey was a hump-backed twenty-five-year-old Nashville bootblack who could play the reeds off a harmonica, and he joined the hordes of amateur musicians who descended on WSM radio in the Twenties when the "WSM Barn Dance" went on the air. He was promptly hired by Judge Hay and became a popular performer on the show every Saturday night, in the days when blackface minstrel humor was a part of the Opry's fare and two of the major stars were known as "Lasses" and "Honey." It was Bailey's version of "Pan American Blues," made to sound like an onrushing locomotive, that preceded Hay's jibe about grand opera which gave the Grand Ole Opry its name. As far as anybody seems to know, DeFord Bailey became the first artist to be recorded in Nashville when he cut eight masters for Victor on October 2, 1928. Exactly what happened after that is anybody's guess. Some people in Nashville say Bailey, for one reason or another, got a raw deal. Others go along with Hay's version, found in a pamphlet about the history of the Opry which he wrote and published in 1945:

"That brings us to DeFord Bailey, a little crippled colored boy who was a bright feature of our show for about 15 years. Like some members of his race and other races, DeFord was lazy. He knew about a dozen numbers, which he put on the air and recorded for a major company, but he refused to learn any more, even though his reward was great. He was our mascot and is still loved by the entire company. We gave him a whole year's notice to learn some more tunes, but he would not. When we were forced to give him his final notice, DeFord said, without malice: 'I knowed it wuz comin',

Judge, I knowed it wuz comin'.' DeFord comes to the show now and then to visit us. We are always glad to see him—a great artist."

That isn't exactly the way DeFord Bailey remembers it. He was treated like a mascot, all right, he says, but he doesn't recall that his reward for playing the Opry was so great or that he refused to expand his repertoire or that he split without malice or, Lord knows, that the Opry people are always glad to see him. "He's pretty bitter about whites, so I don't know whether he'll talk or not," a young independent producer in Nashville, Mike Weesner, was saying one day as he rode slowly through an urban-renewal area in town looking for DeFord Bailey's shoeshine parlor. A couple of years earlier, Weesner had discovered a blind Negro street singer named Cortelia Clark in downtown Nashville and shared a Grammy award (Best Folk Recording) for an album entitled "Blues in the Street." That had set him to thinking about recording DeFord Bailey, who had recently come out of hiding to play the Newport Folk Festival, but just when it looked like everything was set, the whole thing fell through. "It would've been another Grammy. Ask anybody who knows anything about a harmonica, they'll tell you he can play it like crazy. I'd even arranged a ride for DeFord to the studio, but then this lawyer stepped in. The lawyer is a guy who put himself through college by working at DeFord's shoeshine stand." It turned out that DeFord Bailey suddenly wanted "something like twenty-five percent from every record" or the deal was off. Mike Weesner still drops by to see Bailey, but now he visits mostly when he needs his boots shined.

The shoeshine parlor is the same one DeFord Bailey was working in more than 40 years ago, a narrow shack sandwiched between a boarded-up building and the 12th Ave. Eat Shop on the corners of Edgehill and Twelfth, about a

mile from Music Row. The Housing Authority owns the building and will level it when they get around to it, as they have done to most of the other buildings in the area. This latter development has left DeFord Bailey with nobody's shoes to shine except his own, but that doesn't bother him too much. "I come here every day just for something to do," he was saying as he stood between a double row of rusty lawn chairs raised up on precarious wooden platforms. There was a sign on one wall that read NO LOAFING OR STRONG BEVERAGES ALLOWED. Beneath his apron he wore a gray wool suit, striped shirt and a flowery tie, and he kept his hat on as he hunched over, a tiny man with a painful knot on his back, and slowly went to work on Mike Weesner's boots.

"Uh-huh, when a man's going on seventy he needs something to do with himself. Living alone like this, a man can go crazy if he ain't got nothing to do."

"Where you living now, DeFord?"

"Right over there. That building across the street."

"The high-rise?"

"I guess that's what they call it."

"What happened to your house?"

"Housing Authority tore it down," Bailey said. "They're tearing everything down around here. That's what really hurts. When a man passes on and he's got a house, at least when he goes people can drive by and say, 'Right there, that's where DeFord lived, right there in that old house there.' I ain't even got that any more. You think anybody's gonna drive by that, that . . ."

"High-rise."

". . . that building over there and say, 'Right there, that's where DeFord Bailey lived'? Naw, they ain't. You know they ain't."

Bailey wasn't in the mood for expounding on his days at the Opry. He seldom is. How many years did you play?

"Check with 'em down at the Opry." Do you ever go back? "Been a long time." How many records did you make? "You'll have to ask the folks that made 'em." Why did you leave? "I wasn't getting but four or five dollars a night, and they kept me standing in the back." Do you think country music is the white man's music? "Huh, colored people got this music in 'em that white people can't ever learn."

When Bailey had finished with the boots, Weesner asked him if he had a harmonica handy and would he play a couple of tunes. "Is all that mine?" Bailey said, holding up the five-dollar bill Weesner had given him. When Weesner said yes, Bailey reached beneath his apron and fished a gleaming chrome harmonica from his coat pocket. He blew it clear of dust and held it in his left hand, crossing his ankles and leaning on one of the platforms with his right hand, and as he stood like that looking out over the excavated corner lot across the street in this neighborhood where he had spent his whole life he began to play "John Henry." Yes, he can still play. When he'd had enough of "John Henry" he played "Fox Chase," one he was famous for, a tune that simulates all of the sounds of a pack of hounds after a fox. He can play the hell out of a harmonica, DeFord Bailey can.

"We ought to do that record we were talking about, DeFord," Weesner said when Bailey had finished playing and carefully slipped the harmonica back into his coat pocket.

"I like to play, all right," Bailey said.

"Well, let's cut a record, then."

"One thing about harmonicas, they're easy to carry."

"DeFord. A *record.*"

"If I could get me some rest and play some, I'd like to play again," he said, staring through the dirty window onto the street. "But if it pays fifteen dollars, there ain't no future to it. I ain't got no future, anyway. Ain't no future for nobody seventy years old."

Weesner shook his head and moved toward the door. "Let me know if you change your mind," he said.

"Sure will."

"And thanks for playing."

"Uh-huh," DeFord Bailey said. "Come back when those boots gets dusty."

GOING PUBLIC

> No wonder country music's big up North. We've got this one county up on the Kentucky line, Weakley County, that's only got 20,000 people left. Hell, there's 17,000 of 'em living in one little neighborhood of South Chicago. They went up there looking for jobs like it was *The Grapes of Wrath.*
>
> —NAT CALDWELL, NASHVILLE *Tennessean* REPORTER

"Let's play like we've got a show in St. Louis, at Kiel Auditorium, and Cash is the star," Dick Blake was saying. It was late afternoon and although there was more work to do, he still wore the coat to his suit, a very good suit, silk and wool, black double-breasted. A wiry little man with a chalky, pinched face and zoot-suit shoulders, he reached across the cluttered desk in his small office on Music Row and snatched an envelope off the top of a pile of unopened mail. Then he began scribbling figures on the back of the envelope as they came from his mouth. "Okay, a show like that ought to do about $40,000 gross. Cash gets a guarantee of $7,500, but

that comes later because it's off the net. Now, expenses. Supporting talent ought to go, oh, let's put down $2,500. Radio ads, say $4,000. Show like that, I'd spend another $3,000 for newspaper ads and half that much on TV. Kiel Auditorium rents for $2,400. I ought to know that by heart. Okay, then you've got to pay the ushers and the ticket sellers; that's staff expenses, about $1,500. Costs you damned near $2,000 to get the tickets printed, taxes run about $1,200, an ad in *TV Guide* sets you back $300, and then you've got maybe $250 for insurance and licenses and what you've got to pay BMI for performing rights." He added the figures, subtracted the expenses from the $40,000 gross gate and came up with a net of $21,350. "Now," he said, "you take Cash's $7,500 guarantee from that, and that leaves $13,850. John wants 50 percent of *that,* too, which comes to, let's see, $6,925. So it's a pretty good day's work for John. He sings for about an hour and makes—four, carry one, fourteen—he makes $14,425."

"That leaves another—what, almost $7,000."

"Yeah, well," Blake said, trying to be as humble as he could under the circumstances, "God loves a promoter."

Nobody in Nashville knows more about that than Dick Blake, the most successful packager of one-nighters in a town that was built on one-nighters. Blake heads a firm called Sponsored Events, which organizes only 15 country concerts a year in major cities all over the world ("We don't waste our time on the little ones"), and as the Sixties came to an end he had become a wealthy man, better off than most of the stars themselves, affording him $200 suits and a new Cadillac and the best cigars and Scotch. "It wasn't always like this," said Blake, who began promoting country shows nearly 20 years ago. "I remember the first show I ever promoted. It was in 1951, at an armory in Indianapolis, and Ernest Tubb was the headliner. It cost me about $600 for Tubb, $100 for the armory, another $100 for local talent, maybe $400 for advertising all-told. The gross gate was about $1,700. I made maybe

$500 on that show. Man, in those days we didn't have enough guts to take on the big auditoriums." All of that is gone and forgotten now, though. Interest in country music is booming, thanks to the out-migration of Southerners and Southwesterners and the toning down of the music to make it more palatable to urbanites, and it has now reached the point where most of the big package shows play in cities like Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis and even Boston, rather than in the smaller and less affluent Southern towns. "The big thing was all of these people moving out of the South to make more money," says Blake, who comes from Texas himself. "They got up there in places like Detroit, say, and they got homesick, and the next best thing to actually *being* home was listening to country music. So more radio stations started carrying country music, which sold records, which created a demand for live shows, which impressed the TV stations into running these syndicated shows on Saturday afternoon, and so on. It set up an endless cycle in all of those big cities." Let's hear it for endless cycles. In the spring of 1969 Blake put a show into Detroit's Cobo Hall, starring Johnny Cash and Hank Williams, Jr., and the 24,000 customers broke all U.S. country-music records by shelling out $93,000. Maybe their socks were white and their shirts were blue, but their money was very green.

Country music used to be what they call a "phenomenon" of the South. You could be driving anywhere across the South or the Southwest or lower California and it was difficult to get away from the low-watt local radio stations in almost every town, spacing out gut-bucket country and gospel music (Lefty Frizzell, Webb Pierce, Ernest Tubb, Hank Thompson, et al) between torrents of medicine-show pitches for plastic Jesuses, chenille bedspreads, engraved Bibles, Confederate flags, chicken feed, guitar lessons, elixirs of questionable medicinal value, trusses, elevator shoes, over-

alls and just about anything else anybody within listening range might be coaxed into buying through the mail. The heroes were the "preachers" of obscure ordination who served up terrifying shouts of "JEE-zus!!!" and threats of impending doom between barely camouflaged political harangues and advertisements—"*And the Lord-uh came down-uh the mountain-uh and told-uh the sinners-uh . . . JEE-zus!!! . . . A genuine replica of Christ, friends, in beautiful hand-rubbed white plastic, for the dashboard of your automobile, only $2.98, write Jesus, Post Office Box Twelve. . . . And then-uh they came-uh and they kneeled down-uh and they wept-uh and they said-uh JEEE-zus!!! . . . These precious vials of water from the Dead Sea for a contribution of only $1.98. . . . Praise JEEE-zus Hallelujah yes-uh. . . . Now, Sister Velma is going to sing 'Rock of Ages' for us . . . With all of His words printed in red, the color of His precious blood . . . JEEE-zus!!! . . . Only $4.98, for as long as He makes them available . . . JEEE-zus!!! . . .*"

—and when the preachers were finished they were followed by the disc jockeys with names like Cousin Jake and Barnyard Bob, good old boys with exaggerated drawls and hayseed jokes, and they had *their* pitches for anything this side of Jimmie Rodgers' first guitar pick—

"*Howdy and how y'all, pea-pickers, this here's your old buddy, Texas Slim, throwin' some o' that good country music out your way. . . . A gen-you-wine deck of oh-ficial playin' cards with the pictures of your favorite Grand Ole Opry stars right there on each one: King of Spades is Ernest Tubb, Queen of Hearts is Kitty Wells, Jack of Diamonds . . . Want to say howdy to my old buddy, Clarence Dobbs, who ought to be fightin' that big sem-eye into Corpus Christi 'bout now . . . Woo-WHEEEE!!! . . . Lot o' truth in that song by ol' Webb there, neighbors, lot o' truth. . . . That's 36 foot-stompers, count 'em, an even three dozen, going for*

just $2.98 . . . Woo-WHEEEE!!! . . . I'm gettin' back to the wagon, 'cause these shoes are killing me. . . ."

—and it was like that because those were the days when there were still a lot of people trying to hold onto their small farms in the South and the Southwest, and the audience was more or less captive. The radio was their companion all day as they plowed and scrubbed and picked and hauled and dug, and the preachers and the disc jockeys spoke their language. There was no country music on television in those days, once television came, except for Eddy Arnold in a tuxedo and an occasional rube comedian dressed up in a red wig and a checkerboard suit making an ass out of himself for the privileged few who owned the television sets. Whenever country music was discussed in the big general-circulation magazines it was usually under a title like "That Hillbilly Fever's Going 'Round," and tourists from the East flocked to the Grand Ole Opry for the same reason they would later stop in North Florida, on their way to Miami Beach, to visit an alligator ranch: out of curiosity to see what the *freaks* were up to. The boundaries of country music and the boundaries of the South were clearly defined, and those boundaries were one and the same. The people who performed it were *from* the South, playing the music *of* the South *in* the South *for* the South. They didn't play nightclubs, they played honky-tonks. They didn't play auditoriums in St. Louis, they played tent shows in Pulaski. They didn't play "The Ed Sullivan Show," they played 6 A.M. gospel-and-farm news radio programs in Bristol. They didn't fly to the West Coast to tape a television show, they drove eight hours to play a high-school gymnasium in Vicksburg. This is not ancient history. This was country music as recently as 1960, when the rock 'n' roll craze had so taken hold that there were no more than 80 radio stations in the United States that carried country music on a full-time basis; and those stations, generally speaking,

were having to hack it out in the deep backwoods with an offering of jakeleg radio preachers and corny disc jockeys who frantically tried to hold their listeners by convincing them that rock 'n' roll was inherently sinful and was, after all, nothing more than "nigger music."

But all along, since the beginning of World War II, changes had been occurring throughout the country. The war meant boot camps and defense plants, causing a terrible uprooting of people everywhere. Northern kids came to Fort Benning or Fort Campbell for basic training, and for the first time in their lives heard country music over the radio and in the barracks. Southerners abandoned their farms and streamed into Atlanta and Detroit and Chicago and Los Angeles to take the lucrative jobs in war factories. When the war was over, some of the Northern kids went back home and had to admit the music had sort of grown on them in spite of themselves; and many of the Southerners stayed on in the big cities where they were making more money than they ever thought existed, and they bore children and they wrote their cousins and told them they ought to quit the farm and come on up to Detroit, too, where there was money growing on trees. All of this happened over a period of 20 years, and suddenly when the Sixties came there were huge pockets of formerly rural white Southerners cloistered in nearly every major city in the United States. Nat Caldwell's example of Weakley County, Tenn., is no freak ("There's a funeral home up there that runs the tires off a hearse every year, going back and forth to Chicago, bringing 'em back home for the last time"). One county judge in Tennessee actively stumped for reelection in a suburb of Indianapolis, where many of his constituents live and work *during the week,* and the votes he was after (and got) were not absentee votes.

This was the first in a series of events that make it easy to

explain why country music is big business today all over the nation. It is not really a "phenomenon" at all. Southerners moved out of the South. They wanted to hear country music. Radio stations began to play their music. They wanted to *see* country music. Promoters showed it to them. They wanted to buy country records. Record shops began selling country records. Even non-country fans in Northern cities liked some country musicians, those like Eddy Arnold and Roger Miller and Chet Atkins, who had taken the country out of their music, so more young performers, such as Glen Campbell, started coming along with what was termed "pop-country." Everything else fell in line: country music on network television shows, serious discussions of Nashville and the Nashville Sound in the better magazines and even in *The New York Times,* country music at Carnegie Hall on a recurring basis (Ernest Tubb had been the first, in 1947) and at the Newport Jazz Festival and in country-music night clubs, package shows for overseas U.S. troops (predominantly Southern kids, in the American tradition), a fusing of the music with pop and rock and folk music, and, finally, a blossoming interest in the music among Europeans and Asians who had first heard it from American servicemen. Country music had experienced several brief moments of popularity, but this time it appeared to be real and lasting. It wasn't rural Southern music any more. It was the folks' music and it belonged to anybody with white skin and a blue shirt: North, South, East or West.

Country music went public, in other words, during the Sixties. During the decade, the number of full-time country radio stations zoomed from 80 to approximately 600. More than a dozen stars were taping weekly half-hour color television shows in Nashville and sending them out over the country, some of them carried in upwards of 100 markets, almost always on Saturday afternoons. Country musicians were picking up easy paychecks by singing a couple of songs to be

slapped inside the alleged plot of Nashville-produced feature movies (*Nashville Rebel, Golden Guitar, Girl from Tobacco Row, Forty-Acre Feud,* et al), movies churned out on budgets of about $50,000 and specifically angled toward small-town Southern and Midwestern neighborhood and drive-in theaters. In 1968 and '69 the television networks brimmed with country music: "The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour" went out over CBS-TV every Wednesday night at prime time and made a killing in the ratings, Johnny Cash and Buck Owens taped weekly network summer replacement shows in Nashville, Lynn Anderson appeared as a regular on "The Lawrence Welk Show," Joey Bishop had a country singer as a guest nearly every time you stayed up for his late-night talk-and-variety show, a situation-comedy-and-music show called "Minnie Pearl's Boarding House" was piloted, Public Broadcasting Laboratory produced a 90-minute special on Cash, and endless specials featuring country-inspired entertainers like José Feliciano and Ray Charles presented occasions for bringing in guest stars from Nashville. In Newport, R.I., a country-music festival was added to the usual lineup of jazz and folk festivals. In Tokyo, Japanese singers wearing Western outfits and singing "Lovesick Blues" found regular work on a Japanese version of the Grand Ole Opry. In England, rock 'n' roll groups took on names like "The Kentucky Wonders" and began doing country music. In Rochester, N.Y., a promoter named Abe Hamza paid all of his bills and then some by booking country acts on a circuit taking in towns throughout New England, Canada, Pennsylvania and New York. Regular and highly profitable stops for country package shows included the London Palladium and Carnegie Hall and the Hollywood Bowl. Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra came out at the same time with albums loaded up with new-country songs like "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" and "Gentle On My Mind" and "Little Green Apples." Bob Dylan cut an album in Nashville ("Nashville Skyline,"

including a duet with mutual-admirer Cash) and told *Newsweek* he never had felt at home with the New York folk-music crowd because one of the major influences on him had been—watch it, now—Hank Thompson. Almost every major city in the United States had at least one nightclub featuring big-name country acts (although some of the stars, namely Sonny James of Hackleburg, Ala., "The Southern Gentleman," bowed to their rigid religious upbringing and refused to work any place where liquor was served). And the overseas military was being tapped like never before: Bill Anderson's weekly color television show was shown by Armed Forces Radio and Television Service in 21 foreign countries, some 40 percent of the music programmed over the Armed Forces Network in Europe was country, nearly three fourths (or $5 million worth) of the records sold at European post exchanges each year were country records, stars regularly toured European and Asian bases, and in Vietnam the voice of Marty Robbins crooning "El Paso" over the radio stirred the sweltering heat that hovered above bamboo-and-canvas base camps in the Mekong Delta. "We're thinking of home more than ever before, and country music is the music of home for all of us," a serviceman in Munich was quoted in a Christmas issue of *Billboard Music Week.*

The very guts of the country-music business is local radio, however, just as it was 20 years ago in the gospels-and-cornpone era, and it is still the quickest way to gauge what is happening to the music: who is singing it, who is buying it, where it is headed. The Sixties saw an incredible growth in the number of radio stations programming country music full or part time, and the telling point was that many of the stations making the switchover from pop or rock were in such metropolitan areas as Boston, Seattle, Philadelphia, Chicago and New York. With no little bit of propagandizing from the newly formed Country Music Association, the 80

full-time country stations of 1961 ballooned to 208 in 1965, to 328 in 1967 and to some 500 as the Sixties ended. The total number of radio stations carrying country music either full or part time doubled during the decade, and the testimonials were fervent and numerous from those who had elected to switch rather than fight: "I don't think I've ever experienced this type of listener involvement in all my time in radio," said the boss at Philadelphia's WRCP, which changed over from middle-of-the-road to country in 1967; WWVA in Wheeling, W. Va., a 50,000-watter that had been a late-night mail-order country station for many years, drew 82,000 pieces of mail one year and then went full-time country and got 347,000 letters the next; WJJD wasn't even listed in Chicago audience surveys before it made the switch in '65, but soon ranked third and fourth in listenership; Hackensack's WJRZ turned country the same year, booming to the tip of Long Island, surprised nearly everybody by sometimes ranking fourth in the New York area, and showed enough nerve to open a country nightclub in the downtown-Manhattan Taft Hotel (which folded, however, after a few months of high rent and expensive stars); KRAK had a larger share of the Sacramento audience than the city's two rock stations combined during the morning hours, when the kids were in school and the audience was mostly housewives; and billings increased by 400 percent for WSLR in Akron in the two years following its switch to country programming. Everywhere the story was the same: Los Angeles, Seattle, Atlanta, New Orleans, Jacksonville, Columbus (O.). The homespun disc jockey was having trouble finding work, even in the small Southern towns, and now country radio had taken on a new image: no talking down to the audience, no more "Woo-WHEEEE!!!," no more pushing cough syrup, no more Barnyard Bob; rather, play Glen Campbell a lot, talk nice to those misunderstood housewives, take an occasional shot at the liberals and the left-wing students, show some class, don't

say "ain't," work like hell and advertise. There were still some Barnyard Bob stations around, one of them being KXEL in Waterloo, Iowa, which advertised on a religious program a skin softener called "Cosmo," that could be had for "just a $10 contribution, as God makes possible for one day only," but these no longer represented country radio.

Those that best *do* represent today's country radio stations are typified by WPLO in Atlanta, a 5,000-watter which was doing all right as a rock station in 1966 when it saw even greener fields in country. The decision to switch to a full-time country format was actually made in Memphis, headquarters for the Plough broadcasting company, which has AM-FM operations in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago and Memphis, in addition to Atlanta. Plough, Inc., had been in country music with some success from 1939 to 1954 (WMPS in Memphis ranked as one of the top country stations in the U.S. at one time), but bailed out of it during the rock 'n' roll scare in the Fifties. Then, in 1965, the Chicago listening audience was thoroughly surveyed and Plough ordered its station there, WJJD, to go country. The switch was so successful that Atlanta was researched and WPLO followed suit the next year. Finally the same thing happened in Boston two years later, and WCOP became New England's voice of country music. Plough's three full-time country stations (WMPS and Baltimore's WCAO are still playing Top Forty) have had an impact on country programming and are generally respected in Nashville for their integrity, their more sophisticated approach and their highly profitable stage shows held locally by the stations from three to five times a year.

It is not so surprising that a good full-time country radio station would do well in Atlanta, which teems with blue-collar workers from the outlying rural areas in spite of its image as a "New York of the South." When Plough decided to change WPLO's format from rock to country, the station was doing reasonably good business but had little hope of

knocking off powerful WQXI—the city's wriggly, squealing champion of the teeny-bopper set. So WPLO shifted its allegiance from James Brown to Waylon Jennings, entering into competition with a handful of lightweight suburban stations that played country-and-gospel during daylight hours or on a part-time basis, and soon there were certain hours of the day (on certain rating systems) when WPLO was getting a larger share of the Atlanta radio audience than all-things-to-all-people WSB, the 50,000-watt Deep South powerhouse. WPLO brought in a half-dozen experienced country disc jockeys who knew better than to play like Barnyard Bob in a place like Atlanta, put its money on the smoother "now country" sounds, installed such features as "Vietnam Salute" (a tip of the Stetson to local kids serving in Vietnam), auctioned off things like old Porter Wagoner shirts to help out local charities, began producing a string of highly successful "Shower of Stars" shows at the antiquated 5,000-seat city auditorium (tickets $2 to $3.50), put out a weekly chart of the top country tunes in the Atlanta area and carried spots by the Playroom ("Nashville on Peachtree"), a new nightclub that was bringing in the biggest stars in the game and doing landslide business nearly every night. The station also ran a contest among listeners to select the "WPLO Country Artist of the Year" (presented at a "Shower of Stars" show) and passed out proclamations and white ten-gallon hats to Honorary Western Gentlemen (Gov. Lester Maddox being one). "I feel like we've created an entirely new audience," said general manager Herb Golombeck, "many of whom never, or seldom ever, listened to country music before."

A country station has to have two things to make it big these days: promotion and good disc jockeys. Sometimes it seems as though Golombeck wrote the book on radio promotion, because something is always popping at WPLO. There are the "Shower of Stars" shows, three a year, the first nine of them complete sellouts; a fishing derby at Lake Lanier, 20,-

000 fans showing up for a free day of fishing, prizes ranging from a boat to fishing tackle; an amateur talent contest, the winner getting a shot at a recording contract in Nashville; WPLO "Country Caravans" at shopping centers and car lots from April to November, featuring local talent playing from a flatbed truck; drop-in visits from touring country stars, a benefit horse show and an on-the-air "Auction for the Arts" that brought in more than $6,000 one time for the Atlanta Music Club. "Success," said promotion director Dorothy Kuhlman, "depends primarily on the music, and keeping our sound fresh and alive with information and interesting promotions." This puts the bee on the deejays, and the ones at WPLO (among them Johnny Koval, or "Johnny K.," named "Mr. D.J.-U.S.A." by WSM Nashville in 1963, and Honest John Fox, *Billboard*'s "Favorite C&W Disc Jockey" in Atlanta one year) are respected in Nashville to the point that WPLO is regarded as one of the nation's five major breaking points for a new record. The WPLO jocks play down the corn, turn up the music, do a little picking and singing themselves around town (Mac Curtis, now departed, had a few records out of his own while he was at the station), and roar into Nashville each year for the Deejay Convention. The pay won't keep a guy in Cadillacs, but a good country disc jockey can be almost as big as an Opry star with his listeners, and that can help him forget the hunger pains.

Of the thousands of record spinners working the nation's 2,000 or more country radio stations, many of them itinerants who wander from town to town for $10-a-week raises, the most influential is probably Ralph Emery, host of WSM Nashville's nightly "Opry Star Spotlight." Emery, thirty-five, was raised in McEwen, Tenn., about 50 miles due west of Nashville, and had sports announcing in the back of his mind while he served his apprenticeship at stations from Paris, Tenn., to Baton Rouge, La., primarily as a pop jock and jack-

of-all-trades ("At Paris I was 'Uncle Ralph' and told stories to the kiddies for forty-five dollars a week, which beat the thirty-two dollars a week I was making at a laundry on the side"). The turning point came for him when he moved to WAGG in Franklin, Tenn., down the road from Nashville, doing a country show: "It was a new station and didn't have any records, and the word got out that if you came around with your latest single Emery would play both sides and interview you." The experience was doubly beneficial: he built a following among country fans and performers, and he got a first-rate education to the business through regular visits from stars such as Marty Robbins and Webb Pierce. Finally, in October of 1957, Emery answered the call from WSM to come on into the big city and take over its popular all-night record-and-interviews show.

"Opry Star Spotlight" is on the air six nights a week from 10:15 P.M. to 3 A.M. (with slight adjustments on weekends due to the Opry broadcast), and is undoubtedly the most important country-record show in America for several reasons: WSM's 50,000 clear-channel watts that carry the show into every state in the Union and then some; the location of the studio in the town where most of the artists live, making drop-in visits from the very biggest stars the rule rather than the exception; and the professionalism brought to the show by Emery ("Ralph could do any kind of show; the only thing different is the music," gushes an admirer at WSM). Every night except Sunday (when he flies off to New York to tape a week's worth of two-hour country shows syndicated nationally), Emery settles behind a semicircular desk in WSM's roomy green-carpeted Studio A on a hill overlooking Nashville and becomes, in fact, a kingmaker. Here come the long-distance calls ("Hey, Ralph, how 'bout playing 'Looking At the World Through A Windshield' for me," says a truck driver, calling from a truck stop outside Cincinnati). Here comes Porter Wagoner in a navy blue windbreaker and tur-

tleneck, his newest release in hand, ready to stay and talk to Emery and phone-calling fans over the air. Here comes a new singer and his agent, with the kid's first release (Emery goes into another booth while the network news is on, listens to the first few bars, tells the agent and singer the song just isn't good enough to put on the show). Here's a call from Buck Owens' manager, staying at the Holiday Inn in Nashville, just passing through from California on business. Here's Wagoner reading the Bostrum Suspension Truck Seats commercial for Emery, ad-libbing about how he has one in his bus for those long one-nighter tours and sure wishes he'd had one when he was driving a truck in Missouri before he made it. Here's Little Troy Hess, age three, from outside Houston, "the youngest recording artist in the world," in a white sequined cowboy outfit, being pushed up to the mike by his parents ("Go ahead and say hello to Mr. Emery, son"), Emery hanging in there. And here's another commercial that begins, "In these troubled times, every home needs a family Bible. . . ."

The show's popularity with listeners throughout the country has never been questioned (when Emery mentioned that anyone wanting an autographed copy of a state promotional brochure could get one simply by making a prepaid call to WSM, 3,294 calls flooded in and Emery had to call in 20 helpers, including five Opry stars, to handle them). But its importance to those in the industry is multiplied when they realize that every country disc jockey who can pick up WSM and stay awake that late makes a habit of listening to Emery to find out the trends, the hot records (sometimes a tape will be hand-carried to Emery the minute a recording session ends, a good month before its release date) and, of course, to hear the interviews so they'll have something to ad-lib with on their own shows.

It is during the interviews that Emery, who was once married to Opry singer Skeeter Davis and has even cut eight sin-

gles of his own (the first was "Hello Fool," a reply to big-selling "Hello Walls," and sold 125,000 copies), is at his best. Baggy-jowled, forever chomping on a cigar jammed in the corner of his mouth, he talks to his guests with the instincts of a good journalist: inquiring with loaded questions, often biting, seldom avoiding touchy areas, never playing the part of an out-and-out flack for the industry. His knowledge and his integrity have gained for him the respect of almost all of the stars, who generally regard deejays as a necessary evil. "Ralph is a pro," says one of the biggest stars in town. "You can go to some of these towns and if you forget to call a jock he may get mad at you and not play your records for two weeks. Ralph's not like that. He's got some favorites, sure, but he doesn't let that affect what records he plays." One of those favorites of Emery's is Marty Robbins, who also shoots straight from the mouth, and a piano permanently hogs a corner of the studio for the four or five times a year when Robbins drops by and stays all night to play and sing and answer questions from callers until the show closes. Perhaps the wildest night on the show came when Robbins was on the air and Merle Haggard, in town from California to do a little howling, heard Robbins on radio and drove to the station; before the night was out, Emery had two of the biggest stars in the business singing duets on the air.

Emery is, of course, aware of his critical position in country music, but not awed. "Look," he says, "I know there are a lot of other jocks around the country listening at night. I don't know whether they're influenced by what I play or not. I just take each record for what it's worth: if it's a good record I play it, if it's a bad record I don't play it. If Marty comes out with a bad one, he knows it's bad and I know it's bad, and he knows I'm not going to give it much time. They [the stars] know that. I don't tell them how to sing, they don't tell me what to play on my show."

A couple of nights later, Emery had a visit from Jeannie C.

Riley, who was heading for the West Coast for two weeks in a charm school before opening in Las Vegas. "Honey, you've got enough charm as it is," said Emery. "Naw, Ralph, they're gonna teach me how to *wawk*," she drawled. Then she stood up in her micro-miniskirt and proceeded to demonstrate the walk of the old Jeannie C. Riley, and then projected the new Jeannie, the one about to play the main room at the Flamingo. "Well, Ralph, what do you *thank*?" she said. "I'll tell you one thing, honey," said Emery, "they don't walk like that in Harper Valley."

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THE BILLY DILWORTH SHOW

> One time I was riding with Billy when a town cop stopped him for doing 80 in a 35-mile-an-hour zone. The cop was ready to put us under the jail until he saw who was driving. Then he said, "Hell, Billy, I didn't know it was *you,*" and asked Billy if he'd play a record for him on the radio.
>
> —PHIL GAILEY, ATLANTA *Constitution* REPORTER

Few people who live along the rising Appalachian foothills where Georgia and the Carolinas run together have not been exposed in one way or another to a rangy, drawling boy from down home named Billy Dilworth. For more than two decades, beginning when he was a teen-aged community correspondent for the Lavonia (Ga.) *Times,* Dilworth has been poking around the same lakes and hill towns and backwoods valleys in search of news to put in one small newspaper or another. In that time, as a reporter for papers like the Anderson (S.C.) *Independent* and the Hartwell (Ga.) *Sun,* he has

become such buddies with small-town doctors and sheriffs and fish-camp operators in the area that reporters from the fatter Atlanta and Augusta papers have found themselves shut off from the best news sources with the simple explanation, "I'm savin' it for Billy." Dilworth doesn't do it with big-city brash or country craftiness or, least of all, the promise of large readership (only once has he worked for a newspaper with as much as 100,000 daily circulation); rather, he does it because he is one of them, somebody they can talk to who will "get it right in the papers." To illustrate, his biggest moment as a newsman came when he got a call from a doctor friend at the hospital in Royston, Ga., saying they had done all they could for one of their star patients and maybe Billy would like to talk to the dying man. "I rushed over and got a long interview," he recalls, "and he died the next day. It was the last interview anybody had with Ty Cobb." Although he could have picked up some nice change by reworking the piece for a national magazine, he wrote his story for the Anderson *Independent* and let it go at that because he "just didn't think about selling it somewhere else."

Over the years he has listened to numerous proposals to come down out of the hills and bring his sources with him to one of the bigger papers, but except for a brief stint on the short-lived and ultraconservative Atlanta *Times* ("I believed in what they were trying to do"), he has resisted. It may have cost him a wife one time ("She just didn't think I'd ever leave, so we never got married"), but he seems happy enough where he is today: single, living with his seventy-year-old parents 90 miles east of Atlanta in an obscure community called Red Hill, driving every day into the old university town of Athens to write six "human-interest" columns a week and double as state editor of the Athens *Daily News* (circulation 15,000 daily), occasionally "stringing" for United Press-International and the Atlanta *Journal-Constitu-*

tion. Artistically his column may not be the kind they lecture on at the Columbia School of Journalism (in a Christmas Day column he asked Santa Claus to give presents to "Beatniks: Razors for the men, Dial soap for the women"), but it gets the job done around Athens, Ga. "I don't know whether I'd ever want to move away from this part of the country," he says. "I know the people and they know me. I'm making pretty good money now, and I wouldn't want to leave my folks alone at home like that at their age. And if I moved too far away, I wouldn't be able to do all of these other things."

These other things have snowballed in recent years. In 1960, while he was living in Anderson during the week and working as Northeast Georgia editor of the *Independent,* he accepted an offer to do a daily 15-minute country-music radio show over WLET, a 5,000-watt daytime station in Toccoa, Ga. He took on the show as a hobby at first ("I'd do the talking and somebody else would play the records"), but he had always liked country music, and the idea of getting paid for talking about it sounded reasonable enough. Within a year, he was on the air all day every Saturday with a full-blown disc-jockey show and there were sponsors standing in line to buy time on it. Then a Friday night show was added, on WLET-FM. Then he began putting together Saturday night country-music stage shows, in small-town auditoriums and gymnasiums throughout the area, which he promoted and emceed. Next he bought a flashy Thunderbird, which he kept under cover except for trips to Nashville to visit his new-found friends in the music business, explaining it would "ruin my image if I drove that thing around Carnesville." Finally he became host of a half-hour color television show, "The Billy Dilworth Country Music Party," every Saturday over WSPA-TV in Spartanburg, S.C.

Now, although he insists that "newspapers are my first love and always will be," Billy Dilworth is best known as the

Voice of Country Music in the Georgia-Carolina highlands. He still works a back-breaking newspaper schedule (in addition to his column in the *Daily News,* he will often have from two to four bylined stories in the paper), but his new role as a country-music entrepreneur has broadened his horizons considerably from the early days at Anderson when he was exclusively a small-town newspaperman. His income in 1968 hit $20,000 (roughly equivalent to $50,000 in Manhattan), and with it he paneled and carpeted the 60-year-old house where he was born and where he still lives with his parents in Red Hill, bought a crownpiece to cover a bald spot for television, and ordered a $7,800 custom-made Lincoln Continental to make it easier to drive the 60,000 miles he covers every year ("I have it out with Internal Revenue over that"). He makes about four trips a year to Nashville, where he has the respect of the people along Music Row, and he maintains six scattered mail drops so he can keep up with the 150 pieces of personal mail he gets each week. "Billy isn't a personality, he's just himself," says one of his fans, but Dilworth's ability to stay himself may soon be put to the test: WLET is elbowing into the Atlanta market by boosting its FM power, and WSPA-TV is expanding his show to an hour and shoving it into a prime-time slot at night.

Those who have known Billy Dilworth the longest, however, know just as sure as they know there is bootlegging in Northeast Georgia that he will not change. Thirty-five years of living close to the red clay, going to a country church, pulling trout out of crystal water, stomping feet to Bluegrass fiddles, swapping lies in the shade of an all-purpose country store and hearing the yelping of good dogs on the trail of a rabbit puts something inside a man that can't be taken out of him. Billy Dilworth *is* driving a Lincoln Continental now, but it still carries him right back to Hilltop Service Station outside Toccoa to talk with his old cronies about the weather and the fishing at Hartwell Dam and what Min-

nie Pearl had to say about Uncle Nabob's drinking Saturday night on the Opry.

"You know," Dilworth was saying on the last Friday of the year, "you can have all of this news about Vietnam and what the President's thinking, and I guess you've got to cover all of that stuff, but people still want to know what the neighbors are doing. I don't care what you say. I remember when I had my first newspaper job. I was thirteen and I was writing 'dots,' these little short items covering the different communities, for the Lavonia *Times*. I was in charge of writing about Red Hill. Well, Red Hill wasn't any bigger then than it is now, about a hundred people and three stores along the highway is all there was to it, but two of the *Times*'s eight pages every week were filled with news about Red Hill. Pretty soon everybody knew everything there was to know about the place, and the wire services started picking up things from time to time, and today you can look in the Rand McNally and see Red Hill looks bigger on the map than Carnesville (pop. three hundred) does. Then when I went to the University of Georgia I kept corresponding for the *Times*, and I filled it up with stories about Franklin County students going to school: what they were studying, what fraternity or sorority they were joining, all of that kind of news. I don't know, I just think that's what people are really interested in. That the way you feel about it, Leonard?"

Leonard was Leonard Pitts, who was behind the wheel of the white WLET staff car carrying them to Monroe, Ga., two days after Christmas, to broadcast the Monroe Invitational Basketball Tournament. Pitts is a lanky, crewcut Toccoa postman who has doubled as a sportscaster ever since the day he relieved a public-address announcer at the Senior Little League Field for an inning. A cigar was clenched between his teeth and he hunched over the steering wheel, driving cautiously over the rolling back-country roads at dusk, now and then mumbling, "You're probably right,

Billy," most of the time merely nodding to the things Dilworth was saying. Together like that, they were faintly reminiscent of Andy Griffith and Don Knotts tooling around Mayberry in a squad car. Dilworth was sprawled over the front seat beside Pitts, and needed rest. That day's *Daily News* had included a column by him about the annual day-after-Christmas rush to exchange gifts ("Life is somewhat like December 26," he wrote. "We're right much pleased with what we have, but things could be a little better"), a Dilworth story out of Royston about a holdup, and another bylined story from Monroe about a funeral for a man shot during an alleged holdup. The top story in the paper was, of course, about the splashdown of Apollo 8.

"Guess you're glad Christmas is over," Dilworth said.

"Sure am," said Pitts.

"That's one job I wouldn't want."

"Walking does get old after a while."

Dilworth paused and frowned. "Leonard, did it seem to you, though, like the greeting cards kind of fell off a little bit this year?"

"Sure did. I could tell it."

"I thought so. I didn't get near the cards I usually do. Didn't send out as many, either. Just didn't have the time. Maybe that's what's wrong with everybody nowadays: too busy for things like sending Christmas cards."

"You're probably right, Billy," Pitts said. "Anyway, it's over and I'm glad. Feel like I could use a vacation."

"I've got anything but a vacation coming up."

"The teeth?"

"Gonna take the uppers Monday."

"Who's doing the work?"

"Doc Williams in Toccoa. I've been trying to talk him out of surgery. Can't see myself sitting up in a hospital. Worst thing is what it's gonna do to my speaking voice. I went

ahead and canceled three stage shows and taped the TV shows ahead of time, but I hadn't thought about trying to talk over the radio without my uppers. Hey, we're running late. Ought to be there by now, shouldn't we?"

"I think we're lost."

"Come on, Leonard. Lost? In *Monroe*?"

"Looks that way."

"Well, like they say, 'When in doubt, punt.' "

"Or signal for a fair catch."

"How's that?"

"You didn't hear that one yet?" Pitts said, turning his cigar over in his mouth. "This old boy was playing quarterback and they were getting beat so bad that when he came out to take the snap from center he signaled for a fair catch."

WLET's three-hour coverage of the basketball tournament, a two-night elimination involving the girls' and boys' teams from four area high schools, came off without a hitch. The two men sat on folding chairs at a rickety scorer's table on the floor of the gleaming varnished court, with a clear shot at the Coca-Cola clock, and while Pitts did the play-by-play, Dilworth added "color" and read the commercials (75 spots of 15 seconds each, meaning a break for one every other minute) and plugged the big year-end country-music stage show he would emcee the next night in Clayton, Ga. It was an exhilarating night of fresh-cheeked cheerleaders and wiry young athletes and well-scrubbed farm-grown parents with eyes only for their own, a classic night in a small-town Southern high-school gymnasium. When their work was finished around ten o'clock, Dilworth and Pitts quickly packed their equipment and drove to Athens for a bite to eat at Gigi's Pizza with a state trooper and a Methodist preacher and two fans. Finally, Dilworth was dropped off at the *Daily News* office to spend 45 minutes banging out a Sunday col-

umn, and then he drove home to Red Hill for some sleep before what would be a very busy Saturday of country music.

The offices and studios of WLET are in a low white building on the outskirts of Toccoa, a town of about 8,000 that hugs the South Carolina line and boasts not only of being the birthplace of Paul Anderson, the World's Strongest Man, but also of being headquarters for 47 small industries making everything from caskets to earth-moving equipment ("There's not but one family in Stephens County that makes its living exclusively off the soil," brags one citizen, treating it as a status symbol of the New South). WLET is one of three stations owned by a pair of doctors in Crossville, Tenn., and covers an area of roughly 75 miles in every direction from Toccoa. There are a lot of people within earshot who care for country music, so 38 percent of the station's music each week is for them.

The Billy Dilworth Show, which runs from 8 to 11 P.M. on Fridays and from 10:30 A.M. to 5 P.M. on Saturdays, accounts for the most popular portion of that. Dilworth, who never was a disc jockey to begin with, has an unusual arrangement with the station. He is regarded as "outside talent" rather than as an employee of the station, and instead of being paid a fee he lines up his own sponsors and gets exactly one third of the take (most station salesmen would receive a flat 15 percent). The sponsors are businesses like Hanley's Mobile Homes and Hilltop Service Station and Beggs Supermarket, and 20 of the 28 have been with him for the past seven years. WLET hasn't bothered to do an audience survey in five years, explains Warren Dean, the general manager, "because that's how long we've been sold out."

The Dilworth of the air is the same as the Dilworth talking with the boys at Hilltop Service Station: down-home, painfully gracious, chatty, with touches of the rural Southern preacher in his voice ("Thanks for sharing that with us,

ma'am"). One time when he happened to mention that his birthday was coming up, he got eight cakes at the station before he could get his lady fans to stop baking. The Billy Dilworth Show is a caravan of the latest country songs, personalized commercials ("I was eating at the Chic-and-Burger yesterday, and I mean to tell you they know how to make a hamburger") and, the *pièce de résistance,* on-the-air conversations with anybody who happens to phone in during the show. It may sound corny to urbanites blowing past Toccoa on the Interstate; but, then, they don't eat at the Chic-and-Burger.

Just before 10:30 on Saturday morning, Dilworth bolted into the cramped broadcasting booth at WLET, grabbed a handful of records and taped commercials, plunked himself into a swivel chair behind the control board and officially took the reins from a young weekend disc jockey who had just wound up an "easy-listening" show. He had barely signed on ("Now it's time for some of that good country music") and slapped Don Gibson's "Everlovin' Never Changing Mind" on the turntable when the phone started buzzing: Wanda Jackson and Melba Cleveland wanted to hear "Stand By Your Man" by Tammy Wynette (who had just divorced her husband to marry singer George Jones), and Speedy Mullinax of Lavonia wanted to suggest that Dilworth get a two-way radio for his automobile ("Been thinking about that, Speed, but I understand those things won't stretch but fifteen miles"). By the time the first record had played out, Dilworth was taking his first live call of the morning.

"On the phone is Will Mealor from—Will, where you calling from today?"

A lazy voice crackled over the wires. "The hubcap place."

"The what?"

"Ace Auto Parts, up in Baldwin."

"You're the night watchman there, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Let me ask you this," Dilworth said. "What would happen if some thieves tried to make their way into Ace Auto Parts? What kind of protection do you have?"

"I got two shotguns and two pistols," Will Mealor said. "Got some buckshot, too. Hey, how 'bout you just trying me out?"

"You think I might get into some trouble, do you?"

"I believe you would."

"Will, I think you told me you have some dogs, too."

"Two German shepherds."

"They're mean, are they?"

"They'll bite your britches leg off. Try 'em and see."

"I don't think I'm gonna be trying."

"I don't believe I would, neither."

"Will, who can we play you some music for?"

"Just anybody you want to play it for. It don't make a bit o' difference on me today. The wind's a-blowing out here so hard, I don't care whichaway it blows."

Left with the choice, Dilworth put Jeannie C. Riley's "The Girl Most Likely" on the turntable and went back to talking with Will Mealor off the air. Will said he was going to try to make it to the show that night in Clayton, and Dilworth told him there was a chance his friend Bill Anderson, the Opry star, would be there as a special guest. When he had hung up, Dilworth took a clipboard and logged the songs he had played so far (BMI in Nashville asks select radio stations around the country to do this for two weeks each year, using the reports to compute the royalties it pays to writers, and Dilworth feels it is an honor to be selected for the logging process).

The rest of the day was spent on the run. There was a cup of coffee for lunch, at Cobb's Restaurant. There was Dilworth sitting amid floor lamps and sofas and washing machines at Sewell Furniture & Appliance, a sponsor, next door to Joyce's Beauty Salon on South Sage Street, catching the

last half of "The Billy Dilworth Country Music Party" on a big new color TV set. Then, back to the station for more dedications ("Delighted to talk to you, Pat, and as you go down the Interstate we'll play it for you"), more records ("Here's Johnny Seay with 'Three Six-Packs, Two Arms and a Jukebox,' and that spells a whale of a Saturday night"), more commercials ("Friends, let Bill Cochran in Toccoa take your expert photographs"), and an over-the-air chat with Doyle Williams, a rollicking, barrel-chested old boy who keeps North Georgia's parks clean for the State Highway Department ("Where are you calling from, Doyle?" "I wouldn't ask *you* that"). After getting a promise from Doyle that he would buck-dance in his red dancing shoes and overalls that night at the stage show, Dilworth played a last record ("Doyle wanted us to play something special for the Cornelia Fire Department"), got in a final plug about that night's show ("We'd like to divulge the name of the Grand Ole Opry star who's going to be there, but we don't want to put him on the spot since he's on a little vacation"), then drove away from the station and headed into the hills.

At the wheel of his '68 Thunderbird (the Lincoln wouldn't be ready for another six weeks), Dilworth sped up the old highway that rips past an endless series of roadside restaurants and neglected towns into the cool green mountains. Northeast Georgia is great country, except where man has tried to fool around with it ("Used to, didn't nobody stop in Cleveland on purpose," somebody once said of one of the towns lying in the corridor leading to North Carolina). Dilworth paid little attention to the countryside flying past him, because he has seen it a million times. For a while he drove silently, hunting for a country-music station on his car radio, and then he turned off the radio and tried to act interested in driving to Clayton.

"Is Anderson going to make it?" he was asked.

"I hope so," he said. "He had to go to Charlotte first."

"How long have you known him?"

"Bill? Since we were in college together. More than ten years, I guess." He laughed to himself. "I'll never forget the first time I met him. I was working at the *Red and Black,* the paper at the University, and one day he walked into the office with this red cowboy suit he used to wear when he was playing. He had a little pickup band and they used to play here and there. Anyway, he'd won a talent contest and he came by the office to have his picture made. When he walked in the office, everybody laughed at him in that suit except me. I kinda felt sorry for him. I don't think he ever forgot that I was one, at least, who hadn't laughed at him that day. He was talking about that the other day."

"Looks like he's had the last laugh."

"That's right. About a year ago he came back to the University for the first time since he was hanging around wearing that red suit and playing records at the station in Commerce. A lot of people at the University didn't want him to play at the new coliseum. Hillbilly singer and all of that. You know. Well, here he is making about two hundred and fifty thousand a year and one of the biggest stars in the country, and he filled the place up. That's what gets me, the way a lot of people talk about 'hillbilly music.' It used to really irritate me, to hear people say that. What they don't know is, there are a lot of 'hillbillies' around. And a lot of 'em went to college, like Bill and me and George Hamilton IV. A lot of people."

"Do you sing or play yourself?"

"Neither one," he said. "Never have played or sung, except maybe in church. I don't know, I just grew up on the music. That's the way it is for most of the people you'll see here tonight. This is their kind of music, and they don't care for much else. You watch, they'll get there early and pay some money that's pretty hard for some of 'em to come up with,

and they'll sit there for four hours and when it's over they'll be ready for some more. There's nobody as loyal as a country-music fan, and I guess that's one reason I've had those same sponsors on the radio show for all of these years. They know how loyal the fans are. That's also why I patronize my sponsors, if I've got to go out of my way to do it. It just doesn't seem honest, to me, to talk about how great one place is and then buy from another."

There were two major New Year's Eve parties that night in Clayton, Ga., a small hill town that stands like a hitchhiker on busy Highway 441 North. One was at the Heart of Rabun Motel, right on the highway, and a good crowd of the area's more sophisticated residents were bringing booze in brown paper bags to a big back room where the featured entertainment was a Negro troupe imported from Atlanta, starring Piano Red and a belly dancer. The other show was at the Rabun County High School Auditorium, "The Billy Dilworth Country Music Party," featuring everybody from Doyle Williams, the buck-dancer, to a covey of preschool cloggers, Adults $1.50, Children $ .50, no liquor allowed, Master of Ceremonies Billy Dilworth, come-as-you-are. Thirty minutes before the Dilworth show was to begin, there were nearly 400 people sitting patiently in the auditorium while their kids ran up and down the halls of the school.

Dilworth puts on 20 of these shows a year, using local talent. About the biggest name he has is Joel Price, who was known as one of the best bass players in Nashville for a dozen years until he gave up the road and came back home to open Price's Hillbilly Store at the entrance to Tugaloo State Park near Lavonia ("All I do is comedy now. Won't touch a bass fiddle; I know if I did, I'd be back on the road the next day"). It doesn't matter much to the crowd that this isn't exactly the Grand Ole Opry. It is live entertainment, and that's good enough for them. Dilworth, in a bright-red

blazer and a loose-fitting white turtleneck and baggy blue trousers, quarterbacked the entire show: an intense young local singer named Boyd Peters, projecting the best of two worlds, looked like Bill Anderson and sang like Buck Owens; Lindsey Moore, from Tiger, Ga., in a black ten-gallon hat and a dark-blue work uniform, accompanied the band on "Wildwood Flower," thumping out a rhythm on a battered Plymouth hubcap; a whole family of children in checkered clothes did a clog dance; and Joel Price went through his comedy routine ("My wife is supposed to be twins, but they forgot to separate 'em" . . . "We were so poor, they had to order my haircuts from Sears and Roebuck" . . . "An optimist is a guy who's eighty years old and marries a girl who's twenty, and starts looking for a big house near a school; Jackie Kennedy just married one of 'em." . . .) It was nearly eleven o'clock when Dilworth finished introducing the score of cloggers and the other entertainers who had played and sung, and then a member of the local Jaycees, wearing his white Jaycees shirt and white socks, with the end of an aluminum comb sticking up out of his hip pocket, supervised the drawing for door prizes donated by Dilworth's ever faithful sponsors.

Then Dilworth closed the show, sheepishly explaining that Bill Anderson had called from Charlotte to say he was weathered in and wouldn't be able to make it. "Thank you so much for coming out on a night like this," he said, and before anybody in the audience could get up, here he was, jumping right off the stage and racing to the exit at the back of the auditorium, then standing in the doorway and shaking hands with his entire audience ("Now you just keep on playing those records, Billy, you hear?"). When the last of the crowd had left, he trudged into the principal's office and stayed there a few minutes. When he came out, he was stuffing dollar bills into the pocket of his sweat-soaked red blazer.

"I could use something to eat," he said to a half-dozen friends who were waiting for him.

"You buying?" one of them said, motioning toward the bulging coat pocket.

"If you don't order seconds," he grinned. The Raco Drive-In did a brisk business that night.

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NASHVILLE WEST

> And the tenant men came walking back, hands in their pockets, hats pulled down. Some bought a pint and drank it fast to make the impact hard and stunning. But they didn't laugh and they didn't dance. They didn't sing or pick the guitars. . . . Maybe we can start again, in the new rich land—in California, where the fruit grows. We'll start over.
>
> —FROM *The Grapes of Wrath,* BY JOHN STEINBECK

In the Thirties, when the big banks began moving the tenant farmers off the eroding land of the Southwestern states, literally scraping their ragged homes from the face of the map with bulldozers, the people decided there was no recourse but to leave their land and look for a new life. The handbills showed up almost overnight, telling them there was a Garden of Eden in California, and they believed what they read. Piling their belongings atop whatever transportation they could find, selling anything that wasn't absolutely essential so they could finance the grueling trip over the plains and

deserts and mountains to the west, they poured onto the roads like a frantic train of ants in the largest migration this country had ever seen. They abandoned Oklahoma and Arkansas and Kansas and Missouri and Texas, nearly half a million of them, their pickup trucks and creaking jalopies heaving and belching under the load of mattresses and chickens and plows and people. They followed Route 66 through Tulsa and Oklahoma City and across the high plains past Amarillo and Albuquerque, onward across the parched floor of the Painted Desert and into the forbidding Rockies at Flagstaff; and down again into the broiling Mojave Desert, upwards once more to cross the jagged southern tip of the Sierra Madre mountain range until at last, starving and beaten and out of money, with nothing more than hopes and promises to cling to, they spilled into the lush San Joaquin Valley, where the handbills had told them they could pick oranges and grapes in the cool green shade of endless orchards. But for every one job promised in the handbills, ten men applied. Men with guns and dogs patrolled the orchards against them, so that a man could not even pick a single orange to give his starving child. Instead of a Garden of Eden, they found nothing except more hunger and loneliness and pitiful wages, if any wages at all, and they huddled together on the edges of the towns in clusters of shacks, and they were called "Okies" by the prosperous but frightened few whose land they had threatened.

Thirty years have passed since those bad times, and now most of the bitterness and the hunger and the feeling of being displaced have been forgiven, if not forgotten, in the lower San Joaquin Valley. It took a long time, but finally the original Okies and their sons have fought for and won the paradise they were seeking. There are vineyards and oil fields and cattle and orange groves and green farmlands, and rivers that roar out of the stunning mountains. It is a land of jobs and food and sunshine; big country with peaks to climb

and valleys to ride and trout streams to fish and lakes to sail. At the extreme southern end of the San Joaquin lies Kern County, the third largest county in California in terms of land area (larger than the states of Delaware, Connecticut and Rhode Island combined), walled in on three sides by a horseshoe-shaped rim of mountains, with elevations throughout the county ranging from near sea level to 8,500 feet. Rich in natural resources (gold was discovered there in 1851, oil in 1865), Kern County is responsible for one fourth of California's total oil production and for two decades has ranked among the top three counties of the United States in gross value of farm products. Consequently it has always attracted people whose lives center around the earth and the wind and the rain and the sunshine. Kern County is, in effect, a Little Southwest, with the great majority of the county's 347,000 people having their roots in those very states where the great migration of the Thirties began. Some of the original Okie shacks are still standing, but now they are inhabited by today's outcasts: the Negroes and the Mexicans and the Indians.

When the Southwesterners came to California, they not only brought their rural ways and their rigid religious values and their conservative politics, they also brought their music. Gene Autry and Tex Ritter movies, the Grand Ole Opry broadcast on Saturday night and the songs of Bob Wills and Jimmie Rodgers and Ernest Tubb were big parts of their lives and they saw no need to change this once they had arrived at their new land. Inevitably their hunger for country music was to be satiated in Bakersfield, the county seat. Honky-tonks sprang up, catering to the workers who came in from the oil fields and the farms and the ranches at the end of the day to get their heads messed up (and mess up others) and listen to Western swing and honky-tonk music. Other nightclubs were opened, and country bands were formed to play them. Radio stations started programming country

music. Somebody began to hold dances on Saturday nights. More country musicians came in to work the dances and the clubs and the radio shows. Country music went on television. A studio was built to accommodate the musicians. Publishing companies and talent agencies and a promotion office opened up. Package shows, featuring stars like Webb Pierce and Kitty Wells and George Jones, were brought in. It is not so surprising, then, that by the end of the Sixties the city of Bakersfield, in far-off California, had become a sort of Nashville West: home of about 200 country musicians, 35 songwriters, ten music publishing companies, three recording labels, five studios, two booking agencies and at least a half-dozen night clubs dishing out beer and country music. Bakersfield found itself in the same stage of development as the Nashville of some 20 years earlier, and almost weekly there was a fresh rumor that some big-name performer was getting tired of the bitter Tennessee winters and the faster pace in Nashville and was looking for a house in sunny Bakersfield.

The city itself (Pop. 72,000) is a dreary pattern of wide, flat streets and bleached single- or two-story buildings that shimmer under the summer heat like marshmallows in an oven. But in April there is a cool nip left over from winter, or what they *call* winter in California, and on this day the people were still wearing light sweaters and wool clothes as they geared for Bakersfield's centennial celebration. "From humble and unostentatious beginnings," read a Bakersfield *Californian* editorial, "our city slowly but surely is emerging as a significant economic crossroads in Central California." Governor Ronald Reagan had been in town the night before to address the sixth annual Junior Achievement of Bakersfield banquet (country singer Buck Owens had been a special guest), and Reagan got a standing ovation when he sounded off against the "trend toward socialism" in the

United States: "Can't you picture the Good Samaritan telling the helpless stranger, 'Perhaps we can petition Caesar to see if he can assist you in your plight'?" The Bakersfield Dodgers of the Class A California League would hold their first preseason workout at home, open to the public, on Sunday at Sam Lynn Ball Park. Rapidly melting snow in the mountains was causing the Kern River to swell and roar crazily through the canyons. At the Westerner Motor Hotel, the finalists and the judges in the Kern County Cattle Princess pageant were gathering for brunch in the motel coffee shop. At the bars, the Blackboard and the Texas Barrel House and the Golden West, open seven days and seven nights, business was already starting to quicken. And at the Albert S. Goode Auditorium they were hiding the crystal for that night's country-music show and dance, featuring Bakersfield's own Merle Haggard and Bonnie Owens, all proceeds going toward bringing the 1972 California State Bowling Tournament to town.

"Next Wednesday night Merle entertains the Trade Club, making it the first time the Chamber has used country music for entertainment," a lady named Bettie Azevedo was saying at Merle Haggard's office on Truxton Avenue. She has lived in Bakersfield all her life ("I've hardly even been to Los Angeles"), is Haggard's secretary now, and at mid-morning she waited in the office to give Haggard's band members their pay checks. Haggard, his latest single riding second on the *Billboard* country chart, was fishing somewhere on the Kern River. "Funny," she said. "In some ways, we have the same problems here that they have in Nashville. *We* like to call Bakersfield the Country Music Capital of the West. I mean, there's a lot of people living in Los Angeles who're in country music, but they aren't as involved in it as we are. But up until the last year or two, a lot of the civic leaders just knew we were here and didn't want to admit it. They seemed to have the idea that the people in country music were dirty, you

know, *crummy*, like a sore thumb. But I guess the success of Merle and Buck changed all of that, because they finally put up a sign at both ends of town that said, 'Country Music Capital of the West.' The new head of the Chamber manages the TV station here, and he realizes the impact country music is having on the town's image. There's even been some thought about having a country-music festival here, you know, sort of a Deejay Convention of the West Coast."

She answered the phone at her desk and spoke briefly with the man at Capitol Records in Los Angeles, where the bigger stars of Bakersfield still go to cut their own records. "Bill Woods was the granddaddy," she said when she had hung up the phone. "You have to give him the credit for all of it, because he was here when nobody else was around." Woods, she explained, came to Bakersfield from Oklahoma in the Thirties and had a band that played nightly at a notorious working man's club called the Blackboard. "I remember when I was a kid seeing Bill riding around town in a car with 'Bill Woods and His Orange Blossom Playboys' written all over it. He also had the first country deejay show in town. Anyway, the men would come into the Blackboard from the fields with their overalls still on, and if one of them felt like singing with the band, Bill would let him sing. You couldn't even call the music they played 'Western swing.' It was pure old hill-*billy*." A few years later Woods was followed into Bakersfield by a man named Jimmy Thomason, who started a country television show and hosted dances every weekend at what is now a bowling alley, and then came Cousin Herb Henson, who was given his chance to sing at the Blackboard and later became a well-known radio and television personality in the area. Over the years several stars-to-be have passed through Bakersfield, working the Blackboard and Cousin Herb's television show, on the way to bigger things: Ferlin Husky, from Missouri, who later hit with "Gone" and makes a decent pay day out of Nashville now; Glen Campbell, who can count the

Blackboard as one of the "fightin' and dancin' clubs" of his apprentice years (at $18 a night, union scale), and sang harmony on all of Haggard's recordings right up to the day he hit it rich with CBS-TV; Dallas Frazier, another well-known country singer who was born near Bakersfield, worked Cousin Herb's show, went to Nashville and is prospering there now with a publishing company and an outfit that records commercial jingles; and Billy Mize, a Bakersfield native who now has a television show in Los Angeles. Today Bill Woods is co-owner of a ragged used-car lot in Bakersfield and has a dormant music publishing company ("Bill is the kind of guy who always looked out for everybody but Bill Woods," says a friend), leaving the present and the future of the town's country-music industry to a handful of younger men who took the baton from him nearly 20 years ago.

In Nashville they refer to Bakersfield as "Buckersfield," a tribute to the most notable of those country musicians who came to town in the early Fifties: Alvis Edgar (Buck) Owens, Jr. Owens was born in Sherman, Texas, in 1929, but the family moved to Mesa, Ariz., eight years later. Owens' background was fairly typical of country musicians: son of a truck driver-dairy worker, learned to play the guitar from his mother, taught himself the mandolin when he was thirteen, worked a daily live radio show in Mesa when he was sixteen, went on the road as a steel player for Mac's Skillet Lickers before he was twenty. By 1951, Owens had found his way to Bakersfield and was playing lead guitar at the Blackboard and working recording sessions in Hollywood for artists like Tommy Sands and Sonny James and Bakersfield-based country singer Tommy Collins. Owens was and is a versatile instrumentalist (he plays guitar, mandolin, steel, saxophone, piano and drums), and he was content to write songs and accompany other singers. But then he cut a record for Capitol in 1960, "Under Your Spell Again," and since then has

become one of the wealthier and more popular singing stars in the history of country music.

Now forty years old and living in an airy $150,000 home in nearby Oildale, Owens has won 23 songwriting awards from BMI and has seen his last 22 singles shoot to the top in either or all of the three major country-music charts. A half-dozen of his singles have sold more than 500,000 copies each, and his 25 albums have totaled $40 million in sales. He demands a guarantee of $5,000 plus a cut of the gate for a one-nighter and has hit all of the high spots: Carnegie Hall, the East Village in New York, the London Palladium, the White House (for Lyndon Johnson), and various stops in Asia and Europe. He is a glittering showman whose occasional wanderings into rockabilly have gotten him into hot water with his 10,000-member fan club (prompting Owens to run his famous "Pledge to Country Music" in the trade papers in 1965—"I shall sing no song that is not a country song . . . and I shall not forget it"—followed immediately by the release of hard-rock "Memphis"). He has a syndicated color television show that goes into 40 markets each week, and he has guested on such network shows as "Kraft Music Hall," "Operation Entertainment," Joey Bishop, Dean Martin and Jackie Gleason. The favorite of his songs, "Together Again," has been recorded by more than 40 different artists, the Beatles recorded his "Act Naturally," and Owens wrote the liner notes for a Lovin' Spoonful album. "The big secret," he says, "is to write a song, record it, then control it." The incredible Bakersfield-based empire he has amassed proves his point: four ranches in California, five rental homes in Bakersfield, a record label, a publishing company, a booking agency that handles almost all of Bakersfield's country artists, and even the only exclusively country record shop in town. "Buckersfield" makes sense, because for the past decade Buck Owens has had his hands on almost anything that *was* anything in Bakersfield.

Owens and his manager, Jack McFadden, had left town on a string of one-nighters, leaving his sister, Dorothy Owens, in charge of Buck Owens Enterprises and Buckaroo Music and Owens-McFadden Artists Corporation (OMAC) and all of the rest. The operation is housed in a modest brick building on the west side of town, next door to a King Donut shop. Owens has been in the building for just two years, but already he was negotiating for another place so there would be enough room for the record shop and the office staff. In the front part of the building was the record shop, a small room crowded with tables overflowing with records of nearly every country artist under the sun. Behind that was a larger room with filing cabinets and desks and secretaries, and a plaque on the wall proclaiming Buck Owens Day in Bakersfield: "Whereas, through his influence Buck Owens has been instrumental in making Bakersfield 'The Country Music Capital of the West,' second only to Nashville, Tenn. . . ." It was a time for rejoicing around Owens' headquarters, because the announcement had just been made that he would co-host a summer replacement show for the Smothers Brothers over CBS-TV, a country-oriented show that would be taped in Nashville and be called "Hee Haw."

"As far as I can tell, it's sort of a country 'Laugh-In,'" Dorothy Owens was saying. "Buck will have people like Loretta Lynn and Archie Campbell on. I'm not so sure about the name of the show, because it sounds like a put-down, but it sure is a break for him. That'll make two country-music shows on the networks this summer, Buck's and Johnny Cash's." She is a trim, efficient woman with soft blond hair and chiseled features, unmarried, "the general manager of anything Buck has a part of." Only four years earlier, Owens and McFadden had built OMAC around three or four Bakersfield-based stars, she said, but now the agency booked 17. Business had picked up so quickly that the state had sent

around auditors to see if the books were lying. And Dorothy Owens could see no end to the prosperity. "We're having a studio designed for us right now, and we think it will be the finest recording studio on the West Coast," she said. "We'll start right out with sixteen-track and, well, with facilities like that here there won't be any need to go somewhere else to record. It won't be long before Buck and Merle and the others will be staying right here to cut their records. This town has plenty of excellent musicians for recording sessions, so that's no problem." Like all of the people in Bakersfield, she thinks the importance of being in Nashville has been overstated. "People have always been under the impression that to make it you had to play the Opry and be in Nashville. But Glen Campbell doesn't play the Opry. Buck was a guest on it once, and Merle's played it a couple of times, I guess. I'm not knocking the Opry, now, but it's just not that important any more." Indeed, if there is a problem with working out of Bakersfield it is being located so far away from the rich Midwestern and New England cities where the big one-nighters are played. But when you've got the capital you can lick any problem: Buck Owens, his sister said, was already negotiating to buy a nine-passenger jet to whisk him and the band anywhere in the country. "I want you to hear something," she said, returning in a couple of minutes with a record, Buck Owens' latest single, and putting it on a turntable. The room began to vibrate with the hard-rock twanging of Chuck Berry's old "Johnny B. Goode," recorded live at the Palladium in London. Trouble from the fan club, maybe, but highly negotiable at the bank.

And yet, Owens, with his streamlined organization and his musical versatility and his slick showmanship and his touch for pyramiding money, doesn't have nearly the charisma of his chief rival in Bakersfield, Merle Haggard, the very epitome of the sons of the Okies who came in and settled the San

Joaquin during the Thirties. And it has indeed become a rivalry in the past two years, since Haggard apparently got his personal problems straightened out and began hitting the top of the country charts with hit after hit—songs, written by Haggard, with that ring of truth to them that makes you feel certain they came right out of the Haggard past. Haggard's friends and co-workers are cut from different cloth than Owens' people, like the difference between wool and silk. When you talk about Buck Owens in front of the Haggard people, the needle comes out ("Well, *some* people like to talk about what they *have*" or "I guess they told you *they* book Merle's dates"); some of it the result of strained business relationships (Haggard's personal manager, Fuzzy Owen, was in a tug-of-war to get Haggard's booking away from Owens and McFadden), but most of it caused by a 180-degree difference in life styles of the two stars themselves. In short, Owens is the kind of man likely to spend an off day on the golf course with a banker or a television producer, while Haggard would rather be out on the river fishing for trout and sharing a bottle of booze with an old crony he used to fight in high school. "The friends Merle used to have, he still has," says Bettie Azevedo, who quit her job at radio KUZZ when Owens bought it out. "You go to the icebox and help yourself when you're at Merle's house. Fuzzy is his very closest friend, and he ran around as a kid with the boy who's now his bass player. He's very careful, too much so, if you ask me, not to make anybody think he's got the big head now. I really think he's looking forward to the day he can quit the road and come home to write songs and catch fish."

The Haggard family came out of Checotah, Oklahoma, a small town about 60 miles southeast of Tulsa in the far eastern part of the state, where both Woody Guthrie and Pretty Boy Floyd were spawned. The father, James Haggard, was the son of one of the top fiddlers in Oklahoma and had a hillbilly band of his own until he married and gave it up. A

son and a daughter were born during the Depression, and just when things were tough enough as they were, in 1935, the family was burned out of its home. Since almost everybody else was bailing off the Oklahoma land for California, the Haggards decided they might as well go, too. They loaded what little they had left onto a 1928-model automobile and fell in line with the other migrants going west, and they stopped when they reached Bakersfield. For the first month or so, the whole family milked cows at a dairy just to stay alive. Then Mr. Haggard took a job with the Santa Fe Railroad, a job he held until he died some ten years later.

Merle was born in 1937, when times were at their worst. When he was a baby, his mother says, he would sleep next to a radio that was always tuned to a country station. As he grew up he became a big fan of Lefty Frizzell, like any kid west of the Mississippi was in those days, and learned to play the guitar and started thinking about music as a career. But that is when the black days of his life set in. Five years after his father died, when he was fourteen, he was caught in a robbery. A year later he drove a stolen car into Arizona and was put on probation. For the next seven years Merle Ronald Haggard (California 65969) was well known by the cops and the FBI: armed robbery and petty theft in Bakersfield, escape in Eureka and Bakersfield, bogus checks in Phoenix, automobile theft in Ventura, burglary and escape from jail in Bakersfield, and finally nearly two years at San Quentin in the late Fifties on a burglary charge. Not until November of 1960, when he got out of San Quentin and turned twenty-three and fell under the wing of Fuzzy Owen back home in Bakersfield, did Haggard begin to find direction for himself. Fuzzy Owen had come in from Arkansas some ten years earlier and played the clubs and Cousin Herb Henson's television show, and then started cutting records under the Tally label (named for his cousin, Lewis Tally, who had first had

the label) in a converted garage in town. Owen liked Haggard and started working with him ("I remember when Merle started singing," says Bettie Azevedo, "he had a great voice but he had this horrible movement he'd make with his mouth, and Fuzzy had to straighten that out"). In 1963 Haggard recorded a song called "Singing My Heart Out," which got faint action, but then toward the end of that year he cut "Sing Me a Sad Song," by Bakersfield's Wynn Stewart, and it caught on. Then, on top of that, came "Strangers," and that was the big one. Owen promptly sold Haggard to Capitol Records and became his personal manager, and the next nine singles released by Haggard became No. 1 on one or all of the country charts. Today Haggard is recognized as one of the better songwriters in the trade and can demand as much as $3,500 for a one-nighter. He is married to singer Bonnie Owens (who was once married to Buck Owens, dated Fuzzy Owen for a while and is now a part of the Haggard show when it is on the road), has a publishing company and a studio at the mouth of Kern Canyon (in partnership with Fuzzy Owen) and is building a spacious new split-level home on a ledge overlooking the Kern River, where he spends every spare hour going after trout. More important than any of this, however, is the fact that Merle Haggard's songs come straight up from the gut in the tradition of the purest country songwriters and singers, and he could well be the next great out-of-the-dirt "real" country artist to come along in the wake of his idol, Johnny Cash, whom Haggard first saw from the audience at San Quentin. If you listen to the lyrics of his songs, like "Branded Man" and "Mama Tried" and "Hungry Eyes," you are hearing Merle Haggard's life:

I turned twenty-one in prison, doin' life without parole,
No one could steer me right, but Mama tried, Mama tried;

Mama tried to raise me better, but her pleading I denied,
That leaves only me to blame, 'cause Mama tried. . . .

It was going to be a big Saturday night at the Albert S. Goode Auditorium on the edge of town, about as big as a Saturday night can get in Bakersfield. The local bowling association was charging $2 a head to get in the front door and selling liquor for 75 cents a drink in hopes of raising enough money to bring the 1972 California State Bowling Tournament to town. The gleaming silver Haggard bus sat outside on the street, swirls of sand being blown around it as a sudden thunderstorm threatened the pleasant cool night air. By eight o'clock, when Haggard's band, The Strangers, kicked off the show, there were nearly 1,000 people in the huge Quonset building and the booze was flowing like water. Nearly 100 friends and relatives of the Haggards had arranged three rows of metal folding chairs in a semicircle at the foot of the stage, where they sat listening to the music and yelling requests to Bonnie or somebody in the band. Behind them the dancers whirled about on a dance floor longer and wider than a basketball court: dazzling young girls with long hair and tight bell-bottom pants, doing the frug with young men wearing short-sleeved turtleneck shirts and hip-hugger pants; elderly couples trying gamely to keep time to the music in a brisk two-step, the men wearing pearl-buttoned Western shirts, their wives in billowy cowgirl skirts; and here and there a drunk, short sleeves rolled up two laps, baggy trousers falling around scuffed loafers, a cup of bourbon in one hand, dancing with his shadow. At the long picnic tables set at right angles against the walls, they were already beginning to build pyramids of Olympia beer cans, and at least one lovers' quarrel had already begun to boil over ("Makin' a complete *ass* out of yourself!").

On the stage, The Strangers and Bonnie Owens played and sang to warm up the crowd before Haggard came on. Their

music could be heard only faintly in the small dressing room backstage where Haggard and four pals sat or leaned against the wall, smoking and talking and passing around a half-dead bottle of warm Old Grand-Dad bourbon. Haggard, dressed and ready to go on any minute now, sat in a chair jammed into a corner of the room, his hand on the neck of the bottle on the table beside him. He is a wiry, bowlegged man with a high shining forehead and black wavy hair and sad pale-blue eyes with wrinkles around them. In tight shiny black denim trousers and a white twill bush jacket, with a black bandanna tied around his neck, he looked more like a wrangler going to town on Saturday afternoon than the star of the show.

"When y'all leavin' out again, Merle?" asked a young kid who was leaning against the wall, his shirt crumpled and his face flushed from too much drinking.

"Friday, maybe Thursday," Haggard said.

"Playin' anywheres here next week?"

"Wednesday."

"Where at?"

"Trade Club, whatever they call it."

"Hot-damn, I'll be there, Merle. I'll sure be there."

There was absolutely no expression on Haggard's face. Except pain, maybe, which seems to be always lurking in his eyes. He swung the bottle of Old Grand-Dad off the table, removed the cap and, leaning back in the chair, took a deep swallow. "Good stuff," he said. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and passed the bottle to one of the other men. Then he cradled his guitar in his forearms and sank back down in the chair, hunched over like an old linebacker taking a break while his team has the football.

"The Opry," he said when the subject of Nashville came up. "The Opry *used* to be important. It helped country music a few years ago, the Opry and WSM. Now, what I think, I think now it's the artists helping the Opry. Who's out there?

Chet's not playing the Opry. Glen Campbell's not playing the Opry. Cash, when's the last time he was there?"

"How many times you played it, Merle?" somebody said.

"Three. Three or four."

"You don't think you'd do better in Nashville, then?"

"I've done better than ninety per cent of 'em out there've done," he said, leaning forward and squinting. He took a breath and thought for a few seconds. "Don't get me wrong about that. I love the Opry. I was honored every time I was asked to play it. But the Opry's just not that big any more. Nashville's not that important, except for some of those sidemen they've got. Hell, it doesn't much matter where you record, anyway. It's what you put in the groove."

"By God, that's right, Merle," the drunk kid said.

"I've got my family here now, and . . ."

"It's what you put in the groove."

" . . . it's too late for me to start moving around. . . ."

"If you c'n sing, you c'n sing, don't matter where you do it at. Ain't that right, Merle?"

"I got to go to work," Haggard said, being careful not to put down the kid, who was still talking about how great Merle is and how Nashville needs Merle more than Merle needs Nashville. Haggard took one more sip from the bottle and then disappeared from the tiny dressing room, leaving it for his friends to finish.

When Bonnie Owens introduced her husband, a boxing-crowd roar went up from the audience. "'Mama Tried,' Merle," some were yelling. "Do 'Fugitive,' Merle." Haggard had strolled onstage, a half-smile on his face, no show biz, winking at Bonnie. He waited until the crowd went quiet. He took a backward step and whispered something to the band, and then stepped forward again, close to the sparkling silver microphone. He put his weight on his left foot and strummed his guitar once, and then, as real as sweat, Merle Haggard raised his leathery face upwards and began to sing:

A canvas-covered cabin in a crowded labor camp,
Stands out in this memory I revive;
'Cause my Daddy raised a family there,
With two hard-working hands;
And tried to feed my Mama's hungry eyes. . . .

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GLEN CAMPBELL

> Not since Elvis Presley's ascendancy more than a decade ago has a young soloist come along to capture the mass audience with such effectiveness as Glen Campbell.
> —VERNON SCOTT, UNITED PRESS-INTERNATIONAL

The monotony of summertime television was shattered in 1968 when an apple-cheeked country boy from Delight, Ark. (local pronunciation: *Dee*-lite), burst into the living rooms and dens of America one Sunday night as host of the "Summer Brothers Smothers Show." Glen Campbell had his roots in country and gospel music, in the classic rural Southern tradition, but he sure didn't *sound* country to people who always thought country music was an ear-splitting concoction of Ah-luv-yew's and whiny steel guitars and scratchy fiddles. Campbell gave them just enough hokey humor to let them know where he stood ("I can read music, but not enough to hurt my pickin', man"), then let his far-ranging, smooth-as-cream singing voice do most of the talking as he belted out everything from such pop-country hits as "Gentle On My Mind" and "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" to Barbra Strei-

sand's "People," and sang duets with Ray Charles, José Feliciano and Buffy Sainte-Marie. Even when he sang a country classic like, say, "Please Help Me, I'm Falling," the last thought anybody had was that it had come out of Nashville. In less than 12 months, then, after quitting his job as a studio musician in Los Angeles, Campbell got his own network television show ("The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour"), signed for five motion pictures, won three Gold Records and four Grammy awards (music's Oscar), sold $6 million worth of records, and began drawing $30,000 plus for a single concert.

In Nashville, reaction to Campbell was what they call mixed. On one side of Music Row were the traditionalists: the ones who fought the admission of drums and electrified guitars on the stage of the Opry, the ones who are appalled by the turtlenecks and tuxedos and the miniskirts you see around town nowadays, the ones who are still mad at Elvis Presley and even Eddy Arnold for what they did, the ones who still believe the only pure life consists of hitchhiking to Nashville and singing like Ernest Tubb and beating it around the country in a bus and, if you promise not to make the pop charts, landing a spot on the Opry. On the other side of the street, pawing the dirt and straining at the bit and scanning *TV Guide* to see who Campbell's guests were going to be this week, was the new breed: the ones who prefer Nehru jackets and long hair and jets and violins over cowboy suits and crewcuts and buses and fiddles, the ones who don't see much percentage in making $44 on Saturday night at the Opry when you could be on the road somewhere pulling down $2,000, the ones who *respect* Ernest Tubb but don't want to *be* Ernest Tubb. Glen Campbell's making it bigger than any country-oriented singer had ever made it widened the ranks in Nashville—brought country music out of the country, opened up lush new fields for it, polarized the traditionalists and the new breed—even more than the cocky upbeat "new country" lyrics of Roger Miller had done some four years ear-

lier. "Look at all the Nashville songs he's doing," said the new breed. "Hell, he never even played on the Opry," the traditionalists shot back. "You wouldn't *let* him on the Opry." "Because he doesn't *belong* on the Opry." Campbell, basking in his new-found wealth and international attention, needed only to shrug his shoulders. "I'm just a *singer,*" he said. "A good carpenter has to build all kinds of houses, doesn't he? Well, I sing all kinds of songs." He was, in fact, the most startling example of what was happening to, or for, country music. A whole new platoon of hybrid performers—Campbell, Miller, John Hartford, Bobby Bare, Billy Edd Wheeler and, yes, young John Wesley Ryles—were modernizing the simple music of their rural Southern childhoods and blurring the distinction between country and pop music.

One thing certain is that few in Nashville could out-country Glen Campbell's upbringing. He was one of a dozen kids in a farm family in Billstown, Ark., eight miles from Delight, in the ragged corner of southwestern Arkansas that bumps against Louisiana, Texas and Oklahoma ("Delight was the big city, you know; they had a grocery store, a post office and a service station, and that made it a retail trading center"). The family turned to music as an escape from the dreary routines of slopping hogs, picking cotton and milking cows. Everybody in the family sang or played some kind of instrument, and when Glen was only five years old he hounded his father until he got his first guitar: a $5 job ordered through the mail from a Sears, Roebuck catalogue. He began getting a broad education in music by singing in the choir at the Church of Christ, listening to Frank Sinatra and Hank Williams on the radio, hearing real Bluegrass picking at the county fair, and even sneaking across the river to Blevins, Ark., to peek through the window of an evangelist church and listen to the spirited singing ("Man, that's where I learned what *soul* is").

When he turned fourteen, music grabbed him by the throat and he went willingly. Quitting school in the tenth grade, he left home to go on a two-months tour in Wyoming with an uncle, Boo Campbell, who had a three-piece band. "We played these little old bars and hillbilly clubs, just about any kind of music, and it got pretty sticky sometimes because you weren't supposed to play in bars up there unless you were twenty-one," Campbell remembers. "We had to scrounge enough to eat on, and pretty well starved up there. I made it back as far as Albuquerque and had to hock my guitar to get on home. Dad sent the money and got it out for me after I'd gotten home." After that, he went to New Mexico to work on the ranch of some friends who had shared their house with the Campbells during the Depression, but soon he was joining another uncle's band in Albuquerque. The band, Dick Bills and the Sandia Mountain Boys, had two steady jobs going that brought in from $85 to $120 a week for the young picker named Glen Campbell: a daily radio show and a weekend date in a dance hall called Coon Holler, in nearby Regina, N.M. "I'd make as much playing at Coon Holler on Friday and Saturday as I could make picking cotton or gathering corn all week, and I didn't like looking a mule in the rump, so I said, 'Music is it, this is the way I'm going to do it; if I play in clubs all my life, well, you know, I'll make a hundred dollars a week or whatever and that'll be it.' " So, by the time he was sixteen he had played just about every kind of music it is possible to play. "This is actually where the background started for me really getting interested in all facets of the music. We played everything from 'Sweet Sue' to 'Avalon' to 'Tumbling Tumbleweed,' and we'd do a hymn every day to end the radio show with. The steel player and I would work out the George Shearing stuff like 'Pick Yourself Up' and 'Easy' and 'September in the Rain,' and we'd listen to Errol Garner records and copy 'em." After four years with his uncle's band, he formed his own outfit,

Glen Campbell and the Western Wranglers, featuring a midget on bass ("When he did his imitation of Elvis Presley he didn't just shake, he *vibrated*"), and booked into a club in Albuquerque called the Hitching Post. "Man, it was like 'beat the band' every night. When you play in a club six nights a week, you play just about anything. Some drunk says, 'I wanta hear "Fraulein," ' and throws a half-dollar at you, and if you know what's good for you, you play 'Fraulein.' It was 'Fightin' and Dancin' to the Music of Glen Campbell and his Western Wranglers.' "

Although he was making about $150 a week at the Hitching Post, Campbell was hit with an urge to give it a shot in Los Angeles. He was twenty-two now, and married (he had met his bride-to-be when she dropped by a club where he was playing), so he and his wife left Albuquerque in 1960 with $300 and rolled into Los Angeles in a '57 Chevrolet pulling a trailer holding everything they owned. A promised job in a club didn't work out ("It was one of those jobs that give you a lot of experience but don't pay"), so his wife took a job in a bank and he went on the road with a rock 'n' roll group, the Champs, best known for a hit record called "Tequila." Campbell let his hair grow to his ear lobes and rode along in a station wagon ahead of a trailer full of drums and amplifiers, singing "anything from Sinatra to hard country" and grossing about $80 a week for nearly a year. "They were a good group, just a bunch of old boys from the South doing what you call 'rockabilly' music," he says now, explaining how his wife's pregnancy and the shortage of funds forced him into the next stage of his career: working recording sessions in Los Angeles. All of those years at hard labor had developed Glen Campbell into a proficient instrumentalist, flexible enough to play almost anything on the six- or twelve-string guitar, the five-string banjo, the mandolin or bass. He started out by working on demo sessions and soon graduated to actual recording sessions, although he still couldn't read

music ("If you're on a couple of hit records, you're in as a studio musician because they figure you contributed something to the sound"). He was cutting an occasional record of his own (in 1961, his "Turn Around, Look at Me" sold 320,000 singles), but he was primarily known as one of the better studio musicians on the West Coast. He picked and harmonized on sessions for people like Bobby Darin, Dean Martin, the Beach Boys and Merle Haggard, and in 1963 he earned nearly $40,000 by staggering through an incredible 586 recording sessions. "The money was great, but I wasn't doing what I wanted to do. From 1962 to 1967, I went through five producers. You go into a studio and you cut what they want to cut, and you're the little guy. When you're not doing what you really want to do or what you haven't really got your heart in, it shows up. So my New Year's resolution for 1968 was, I ain't gonna pick on 'em unless they're mine."

By then, of course, he didn't have to worry. John Hartford, who wore faded blue jeans to formal banquets and drove an old Volkswagen and wrote strange new songs out of Nashville, had written and recorded "Gentle on My Mind." When Campbell heard the fresh lyrics and the haunting melody, he knew it was what he'd been looking for and convinced Capitol Records he should record it ("At first I was with Crest Records, but my group was having 94 percent fewer hits there"). "Gentle" took off like a Roman candle, landed him several guest spots on television shows such as "Operation Entertainment" and "Hollywood Palace" and a Bob Hope special. From that point on, everything he recorded was a hit: "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" and "Hey, Little One" and "Wichita Lineman" (the album of the same title did $1 million in sales on the first day it was released). One night late that year, Tommy Smothers saw Campbell on the Joey Bishop Show and almost immediately announced that

Campbell would host the Smothers Brothers' summer replacement show on CBS-TV. He handled it so well that he was given his own show four months later, and as spring came to Los Angeles in '69, Glen Campbell had more things going than a one-man band: the weekly "Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour" on CBS-TV, recording sessions, a guaranteed $750,000 in concert bookings for the year, starring roles in two major movies, golf with Bob Hope, real estate interests in San Diego and Los Angeles, a gold Cadillac and $3,000 worth of capped teeth. It's a long way from the tables down at Tootsie's to the place where Campbell dwells.

Campbell had grossed $180,000 on successive concerts in St. Louis, Kansas City, Omaha and Wichita, raced home to Billstown for Easter with the Campbell clan, and then brought his parents back with him to visit for a week or so and be on the show in Los Angeles. Now, shortly after noon on the Friday following Easter, his modest office on Beverly Boulevard, a wide, high-speed avenue lined with palm trees wilting in the soggy California heat, looked like a convention headquarters. The office was choking with press agents, secretaries, musicians and CBS executives, and at the center of it all were Campbell and his parents: Campbell wearing striped powder-blue denim slacks, bowling shoes and a flowery, loose-fitting Hawaiian shirt with SUCK 'EM UP printed all over it; his father in a rust-colored nylon windbreaker and his mother in a gay green-and-orange print dress, the farm encircling their wind-whipped faces and graying hair like a halo.

"Is that right," somebody was saying to Mr. Campbell, "a five-dollar Sears guitar?"

"That's right. In the mail."

"Mr. Carroll was taking mail then," Mrs. Campbell said.

"Still got that old guitar, too. At home."

"Does it still play?"

"The keys has been turned so much, you know, they was wore out. Stripped gear. I put a new set o' keys on it."

Campbell said, "I don't think I ever did pay you back for getting my guitar out of hock that time, did I, Dad?"

"Humph," his mother said. "New house, new car, new furniture, color TV. I'd call *that* payin' us back."

Friday was a critical day for the cast of "The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour," which was shown on Wednesday nights over the CBS television network. Monday and Tuesday were off days ("if you don't play golf, you aren't going to be able to find him," says his press agent), Wednesday and Thursday were devoted to working over the script in the office, and Friday was when the regular cast and the guest stars came together for rehearsals prior to the live tapings on Saturday and Sunday in the sprawling CBS studios around the corner. Campbell was merely taking a brief respite from the rehearsals going on around the hall from his office, but you couldn't tell by looking at him that the pressure was on. He rode low on a sofa beside his mother, his long legs crossed at the ankles and stuck under a desk, enjoying it as his father told about the new billboards ("Home of Glen Campbell") that had gone up at both ends of Delight.

"Do you get to Nashville much?" he was asked.

"Too tied up out here," Campbell said.

"I guess that time you sang at the CMA awards was the only time you ever played the Opry."

"Right."

"How do you get along with the Nashville people?"

"From the people in the business, I've always been accepted," he said. "I used to go back and try to get on the Opry. I guess I went out there to the Deejay Convention three or four times, and I'd go to play in the golf tournament and try to get on the Opry. But I just didn't have the hit record, and I got turned down so many times that it kinda

soured me on trying any more. You know how it is with the Opry, the public's got to know you. Well, the general public didn't know me from Adam. It's just like the studio musicians in Nashville that we respect so much out here, the Buddy Harmans and the Bob Moores. These are great musicians, but not many people know about 'em unless they read their album liners real close."

Campbell said he gets mail from hard-country fans criticizing him for straying from their kind of music, but not a great deal of it. "I'm gonna have a lot more Nashville people on the show next year," he said. "The new breed, like David Houston, Jerry Reed, Jan Howard. Waylon Jennings and Bobby Bare. Not the people that say, 'Well, that ain't country and I don't like it.' I think everything's been segregated too long. Chet [Atkins], now these are the people who're great for our business—the people who can pick out the good pop or the good country." He was getting restless now, and he picked up his guitar and strummed it softly. "I like to sing all kinds of music. That's why on a show I'll do 'People' and turn around and do a country song, because I like the song. I don't care who writes 'em or where they come from. I look at it like, 'It's good,' and I don't care whether it's pop, rock, jazz or country. The people that sustain in this business, you find out they've got a lot of talent regardless of whether they're singing country or pop or what. Look at Marty Robbins, or Eddy Arnold. They sing a good song, you know, and they sing all kinds of songs—"

Campbell was interrupted by a knock at the door. "All set, Glen," somebody said.

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Gotta do the run-through, gang."

"Glen," his secretary said, "when you finish the run-through they need you at CBS for wardrobe."

"Okay."

Mrs. Campbell said, "You want us to stay here or go with you, or what?"

"You can come in and watch, Mom." Campbell grabbed his guitar by the neck and, with his parents in tow, zipped out of the office and headed toward the rehearsal room for the final dry run before the weekend's taping.

The rehearsal room, a large bare hall with a couple of windows on one wall and glistening aluminum heat ducts crisscrossing the low ceiling, bulged with about 60 people clearly split into three groups: the show's producers and writers, grim men with bronze California skin who sat together in metal folding chairs lining one wall, flipping in unison the pages of the script each of them had in black looseleaf notebooks; the members of the cast, in tights and bell-bottomed pants and loud sports shirts, sitting on a table or leaning against the piano on the side of the room opposite the writers and executives; and, finally, three rows of spectators who either worked in the building or were friends of somebody, all of these sitting obediently in *their* folding chairs, a pseudo-audience, straining to hear everything, agents dispatched there to find out what Glen Campbell is *really* like. When Campbell entered the room, which steamed from body heat and the sunlight pouring through the windows, comedian Bob Newhart was going over his routine while a bearded guy in a turtleneck knelt at his feet and flashed cue cards for him. Campbell situated his parents in the "audience" and listened to Newhart like all of the rest.

The show they were rehearsing would be shown 12 nights later. The guests were petite singer Vikki Carr, Newhart and the Nashville team of Johnny Cash and June Carter. Vikki Carr followed Newhart in rehearsal, a strikingly handsome girl in a powder-blue turtleneck sweater and charcoal-shaded bell-bottomed pants, and her ringing voice brought

handclaps and whistles from even the jaded executives in the room. Then Campbell climbed atop a stool and after a false start on "Gentle On My Mind" ("Aw, everybody knows how that goes") went over the section of the show where he would chat for a minute with Vikki Carr ("This gal's got canaries committin' suicide") and then sing a duet with her. After that the floor was cleared, and Cash, June Carter and the Tennessee Three, Cash's band, stood in the middle of the room and suddenly the place took on a different feel and a different look. Cash strolled in front of the farm-bred members of his band, and when the familiar bottom bass of "Folsom Prison Blues" began to bend the walls he lifted his craggy, dark, lined face toward the ceiling and began singing—

I hear that train a-comin',
Comin' 'round the bend,
I ain't seen the sunshine
Since I don't know when . . .

—and what struck everybody in the room, as they stomped their feet and swayed like nobody had been able to make them do, not even a Vikki Carr, was the feeling that only a heavyweight like a Johnny Cash or a Merle Haggard or a Hank Williams, only half a step removed from the hard life of the soil, writing and singing in the simplest way about the things he knows, only these can hit us like Mack trucks and leave us stunned or crying or tingling so that we are still feeling whatever we felt for hours. Cash and June Carter then did "Jackson" and "Daddy Sang Bass," repeating for the wildly applauding crowd, and then it was over.

Campbell caught his parents before they got out the door. One of the executives asked for quiet and introduced them, and everybody politely applauded them. Then Campbell

called them over and sat them down in chairs in the middle of the room, gave his father a guitar and took a seat between them.

"How's your singin' voice, Mom?" Campbell said.

"Aw, Lord, Glen, I—"

"Dad, you need a warmup?"

"Naw, I'm ready as I'll ever be."

"You got that old French harp with you?"

"Got it here in my pocket," Mr. Campbell said, fishing a battered old harmonica from his shirt pocket and blowing the dust out of it. "I reckon it'll play all right. My grandkids 'bout blowed the back end out of it."

"Well, let's show 'em some real pickin' an' singin', then," Campbell said as the three of them swung into an old church song and then a hard-country song that had something to do with alimony. Los Angeles isn't so far from Billstown, Ark., after all.

THE FUTURE

> WSM, Inc., today announced that it has authorized a study to determine the economic feasibility of building a new Grand Ole Opry House and creating a major tourist attraction around it. The new complex would be called "Opryland, U.S.A."
>
> —PRESS RELEASE, OCTOBER, 1968

In the spring of 1969, Columbia Records released an album recorded in Nashville by Bob Dylan, a boy from Minnesota who had become the darling of the folk-music crowd in New York. Dylan's reputation had been built on protest songs like "Blowin' in the Wind" and narrative ballads like "John Wesley Harding," sung in a mystical, plaintive, simple and direct way, and he had become something of a legend to the young kids who were out on the front lines raising money for Biafra and working on poverty programs in Mississippi and picketing grocery stores that sold California grapes. But this newest Dylan album, "Nashville Skyline," was something else. It had been recorded in Columbia's Studio A on Music Row in Nashville, the same place where Marty Robbins and Carl Smith and Johnny Cash regularly turned out their country

records. Indeed, the first song on the album was a duet with Cash ("Girl from the North Country") and the album liner was written by Cash, himself an idol of the nation's student rebels but at heart a farm-hardened Arkansan who believes we "ought to support our government's foreign policy" in Vietnam and really doesn't cotton much to "hippahs." The album represented a new Bob Dylan, singing country songs with plain country lyrics and the Nashville Sound in the background, and the advance orders were so strong that Columbia applied for a Gold Record certification (it would be Dylan's sixth) even before it had hit the record shops.

Nashville was buzzing, of course, merely at the news that Dylan was coming to The Row to record ("He knows where the sidemen are at"). Interest quickened when the rumor of a Dylan-Cash duet leaked ("They say they just ran into each other in the parking lot and decided to sing something together"). And when the album was released, it was as though Nashville had been recognized by the UN ("Even the *title* is Nashville, man"). But nobody, *nobody but nobody*, was prepared for the ensuing interview with Dylan by *Newsweek*.

Dylan, the news magazine said, "seems to be rejecting the musical direction his many admirers have chosen for him in the past or would choose for him in the future." He was planning to appear on Cash's network television show during the summer, and he felt more at home in Nashville doing country music (if that is what it was) than he had ever felt in New York. "These are the type of songs that I always felt like writing when I've been alone to do so," he said. "Those [other] songs were all written in the New York atmosphere. I'd never have written any of them—or sung them the way I did—if I hadn't been sitting around listening to performers in New York cafés and the talk in all the dingy parlors. When I got to New York it was obvious that something was going on—folk music—and I did my best to learn and play it. I was

just there at the right time with pen in hand. . . . I admire the spirit of the [new] music. It's got a good spirit. . . . I feel like writing a whole lot more of them, too." Later, Cash was to say about his friendship with Dylan: "Some writers have tried to make something out of it. They say they can't understand how we could be friends. Some people I like, some people I don't like. He can sing, and he *feels* what he sings. That's all there is to it. I regard him as a friend of mine because of that."

To some extent this summit meeting of the kings of country and folk music represented the future of "country music." That goes in quotations because as another decade approached it was becoming difficult to define what was "country" and what was not. Oh, sure, there was still pure, raw-gut country music: George Jones's East Texas twang ("I'll get over you/When the grass grows over me"), Wanda Jackson's bitchy God-Didn't-Make-Honky-Tonk-Angels preaching ("If you want some barroom swinger, I'm not the one/'Cause I don't think a girl's gotta drink to have fun"), or just about anything by Ernest Tubb, Roy Acuff, Porter Wagoner or Kitty Wells. But the Glen Campbells and the Bobby Russells and the Eddy Arnolds and the Roger Millers were crossing over into pop music ("pop-country," they called it in Nashville) so often that what was left of pure country music was in a small corner of the music world by itself: on rural radio stations, at barn dances, at annual fiddlers' contests in the Southern mountains, at the Grand Ole Opry. For kicks, take a look at the Top Ten records on *Billboard*'s Hot Country Singles chart for the week ending January 11, 1969: five of them had transcended the country-music field for one reason or another: Cash's "Daddy Sang Bass" because it was Cash, Campbell's "Wichita Lineman" because it was pop, Waylon Jennings' "Yours Love" because it was smooth, Tom T. Hall's "Ballad of Forty Dollars" because it was folkish, and Eddy Arnold's "They Don't Make Love Like They Used To" be-

cause it was Arnold. Any of those recordings could have merited play—or were being played—on "pop" radio stations. And even the pure hard-country music was being discovered, often because it was considered "quaint," by college students: Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys, Flatt & Scruggs (who split in '69), Acuff, Wagoner and George Jones. Was there going to be a fusing of the music, meaning there would no longer be a difference between country, pop, folk, blues, jazz, all of the rest? Would Roy Acuff, at his age, after a lifetime of singing the stuff he knew best, would even Roy Acuff begin to shift toward the middle? "You go down into these little country towns and you'll find they still like the Acuffs," said Jack Stapp of Tree Publishing in Nashville, perhaps summing up the future as well as anyone could. "There'll always be country, and then there'll always be pop music. But the interlocking will be so that a certain number of country songs will go pop every year. I don't think it'll ever become completely *one* music." And so what the Dylan album meant, in the end, was that folk music had come country music's way and country music had gone out to meet it. Temporarily. Bob Dylan is no more ready to pack his rucksack and hitchhike to a new life in Nashville than Johnny Cash is planning to take June and the kids to New York and get a job singing in a cabaret in the East Village. But Dylan does some things Cash likes, and Cash has been some places Dylan wishes he had been, and they are both big enough to borrow from each other. It makes for better folk music and for better country music. When the barriers fall and communication is established, it helps everybody. God. Liberalism at its peak.

It isn't really liberalism, of course, that has brought about the recent changes in what used to be country music. Call it free enterprise. Hell, call it money. Galloping capitalism overcame country music during the Sixties, and many ex-

amples have already been given (See *Singleton, Shelby S.*, and *Owens, Alvis Edgar "Buck"*). Good old country boys just flat got tired of watching Eddy Arnold and Dean Martin and Jimmy Dean and Patti Page fancying up country songs and making big money doing it, so they started doing the same thing and demanding their writers give them songs that weren't so *country*—"so damned nasal, whiny and scratchy and corny," said Jack Stapp—and then they started angling for their *own* network television shows. And pop stars started going to Nashville to record. And the Nashville sidemen started getting the hang of this pseudo-country music. And the younger guys in Nashville started talking dirty about anybody who still turned out hard-country songs. And business was so good that the music industry was worth almost $100 million a year to Nashville. And somebody started calling it "Countrypolitan" music. And the nation decided that "The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour," rather than the Grand Ole Opry, was the real mirror of country music. And then the people in Nashville started becoming very concerned about their image. *We got to get out of this firetrap,* they said about the Grand Ole Opry House; which is roughly equivalent to demolishing the Tower of Pisa because it leans funny. *Don't say the fans ride in on buses,* Opry management admonished the press, *they own their own cars and they average making almost $10,000 a year.* Maybe country music started in places like Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, but now they don't want to admit the place exists. Image.

A conversation in the restaurant atop the Third National Bank Building in Nashville, with E. W. (Bud) Wendell, latest general manager of the Grand Ole Opry. Nice, crisp, blue January day. Place filled up with businessmen. Martinis and beef Stroganoff. High above the soot and the traffic and the slums and the noise. Wendell, a tight-lipped sort who does, everybody says, a good job running the Opry. Did he read

the piece on the Opry in *Harper's* Magazine, one of the best ever written about the Opry in a general-interest national magazine? The one by Larry L. King.

"Yeah, I read it," says Wendell.

"You meet King?"

"What time he was here. He came in and then disappeared. Most of those guys are like that."

"But he seemed to do a pretty good job on it."

"I guess so. These New Yorkers come in and . . ."

"King's from Texas."

"Well, they come in, anyway, and they make up their mind we're a bunch of hicks and they leave and they write it like that." Wendell thought he was supposed to talk about the plans for a new Opry House, anyway. "I heard of this King. He's supposed to be good. Writes for the good magazines and everything. I was a little disappointed, frankly. He finally found Tootsie's. They all do.

"Opryland, U.S.A., is going to really be something: camping facilities, horses, Western-clothing stores, rodeo ring, record shops, television studios, maybe even some recording studios. Biggest thing though will be a new Opry House. That other place is seventy-seven years old now. No, it's *not* condemned by the fire marshal. We rewired it, put in sprinklers, added exits, fixed up the plumbing, everything, when we bought it from the Ryman Foundation six years ago. But it gets too hot in there in the summer. Too cramped. Hard to televise shows from there. It's urban renewal, anyway. We're looking for about two hundred acres somewhere outside of town."

"Ryman's a great tradition, though," Wendell was told.

"A lot like Yankee Stadium," he said.

"You'll probably get a lot of complaints when you move."

"I don't think so. You ever sit up there on July Fourth?"

"Yeah, but swivel seats and air conditioning. That doesn't seem right. The Opry won't be the same."

"Tradition," he said. "Sure, the Opry and Ryman Auditorium are great traditions. New singers come in here and say, 'Just think. I'm standing on the same stage where Hank Williams stood.' Well, hell. Maybe we'll do a restoration. Maybe we'll just take that same stage with us."

What that tells you is, the country-music *industry* is in great shape. Campbell, Cash, Buck Owens with weekly network television shows. Dylan, Connie Francis, Dean Martin, Jimmy Dean singing "country" songs. European kids digging "country" music. Smiling Japanese cowboys in ten-gallon hats and rhinestoned outfits trying to sing "High Noon" like Tex Ritter, on the Japanese Grand Ole Opry. Close to $100 million a year for Nashville. Kids at Harvard saying they go for "country" music. Screen Gems sets up an office in Nashville so they'll be there for the day when musical sound tracks are recorded with the Nashville Sound. José Feliciano, a talented blind Puerto Rican who grew up in Spanish Harlem, doing "country" songs. Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys making the scene at the Newport Folk Festival. The Opry moving out of the old house into air-conditioned quarters where there's more room for television crews. The *industry* is in great shape, yes. But you wonder about what is going to happen to the music—real Southern here's-how-it-is-down-home-folks country music—when all of this is over. What happens to one of the few genuine forms of American music there ever was? Who cares? Wesley Rose cares, but for reasons that are suspiciously commercial. Bill Monroe and Roy Acuff care, but they have no choice. The John Edwards Memorial Foundation cares, but it is out at UCLA and it scholars itself to death, and besides, it is broke. Pete and Mike Seeger and the New Lost City Ramblers and all of their followers on the campuses and in the folk cabarets care, but they are just as narrow toward the Opry as the Opry is toward them. "The elements that produced the rural sound are vanishing," says Bill C. Malone. "No one will ever again

sound like the performers of the early period. The factors that contributed to the vocal styles of performers such as the Carter Family or the Blue Sky Boys were not synthetic commercial creations; these styles were the result of complex and deeply ingrained mores and behavior patterns bred by the Southern rural environment. If one would preserve the rural musical styles, he must also preserve the culture that gave rise to them, a society characterized by cultural isolation, racism, poverty, ignorance, and religious fundamentalism. It is doubtful whether anyone would seriously suggest a return to such a society, despite the simplicity and sentimental attraction which such a society might hold."

Which is profound and true enough. Times change. Tastes change. You just like to believe, though, that there will be more Merle Haggards around who will do time at San Quentin and then write about it the only way they know how. You like to think there will be more Johnny Cashes who will live through bad personal times and write and sing about it. You like to hope there will be more Porter Wagoners, *yes,* who will keep on singing about how tough it was when they had to drive a truck through the broiling Missouri heat to make a living. Even in bad fiction, truths can be found. "Don't come home a-drinkin' with lovin' on your mind" may be a corny, simple line, but a hell of a lot of poor guys in the world can't really get romantic about their wives—*can't really get sexed up* is what that means—until they have had a few belts at a wait-out-the-traffic bar or at a strip joint. Laugh. You know it's true. Maybe that's what was wrong with country music all along. Maybe it was *too* true. Too, you know, *corny.*

ON THE ROAD WITH THE PO' BOYS

> Playing the road is just like robbing Wells Fargo. You ride in, take the money, and ride out.
>
> —MARTY ROBBINS

The session had begun at ten o'clock on an icy Friday night in January, and there were times when it seemed as though it would never end; that it would turn into the longest continuous recording session in the history of music: Bill Anderson singing "My Life" and "To Be Alone," produced by Owen Bradley of Decca Records, feature begins every three hours, immediate standing in Bradley's Barn, help yourself to the coffee, We Never Close. When you have an Owen Bradley producing a session for a Bill Anderson, only the union can make them quit; and even then they may go underground. "I don't know, Owen, that one just didn't *feel* right," Anderson would say, forcing a re-start. "That's great, everybody, but let's try one more just for kicks," Bradley would say, causing another. They finally had enough down by 1 A.M. to dismiss the four singers and seven sidemen, but Bradley and Ander-

son stayed on at The Barn until four o'clock, just the two of them, overdubbing Anderson's voice here and there and smoothing out the rough spots.

It was nearly 5 A.M., then, before Anderson got home to the comfortable lake house he had recently bought on a private island 20 miles east of Nashville. He flipped on some lights in the deserted house and dumped his portable tape recorder on the kitchen bar, anxious to listen to a copy he had made of the two new songs, and while he set up the recorder, he remembered a night ten years earlier when he had gone through the same routine under less amenable conditions. He had been living in a crowded apartment house in downtown Nashville then, just another young country singer struggling to make it; and when he started playing the tape from one of his first recording sessions at five in the morning, the landlord and the cops came banging on the door and he was kicked out for disturbing the calm, and he drove around town with everything he owned in the back of an old Ford until he left for a long road trip at 10 A.M. Now that he had made it as one of Nashville's superstars he could at least play back his tapes in peace, so he turned up the volume and let the saucy sounds of the latest song he had written and recorded, "My Life (Throw It Away if I Want To)," pierce the quiet of Old Hickory Lake:

You don't understand the pattern of my life
Because my life has got no pattern;
You don't see and you can't feel the wind
That's blowin' at my back and saying, "Move, boy";
You think this burning fever in my heart is just a folly,
And I'm throwin' away my happiness by leaving you;
Well it's my life, throw it away if I want to. . . .

It was a good song, but an abrupt departure from the Anderson style that had always meant sweetness and light: the

soft ballads and recitations that had made him an idol to anything in a skirt between Bangor and San Diego and brought in a quarter of a million dollars a year for him. This one was a bitter song, with a sarcastic harmonica flitting in and out of the words, and Anderson wasn't sure what the reaction would be from his fans. He only knew it was the way he felt when he wrote it. The song was written for the woman he had married when she was the blushing daughter of an Atlanta policeman and he was getting $50 a night to pad out country stage shows. Now they were separated, she and their two young daughters living in the big house on the other side of town while he lived there on the lake, and a divorce seemed inescapable. Anderson, with plenty of elbow room now, played the tape for nearly an hour. Then he shut off the machine and killed the lights and crawled into bed for some rest. Saturday night he would play the Opry, early in the week he would tape three of his syndicated television shows, and then he would hit the road on a bus tour of 20 one-nighters in 24 days, beginning at Altoona and ending in Boston. The only sound in the house was the purring of the heating system.

It is a wonder that *anybody* in show business can stay married for any length of time, of course. The demands on your time and your emotions and your energy are so great that nothing is left for the marriage. Hemingway said you can't be in love and write at the same time because they are both run by the same motor. The same goes for being married and being in show business. And the obstacles are compounded for the average Nashville star, because country music has become about the last outpost of the one-nighter. Buses, planes, station wagons and trains—you try them all. Flagstaff, Beckley, Harrisburg, Amarillo, Logansport and Grand Rapids; you make them all. High-school football fields, county fairgrounds, gymnasiums, civic auditoriums, honky-tonks and

race tracks; you work them all. The average life span of a country hit is so short that when you have one in the charts you hit the road and cash in on it before it sputters. Write a song, record it, take it on the road; write another, record it, one-night 'em to death. Have enough big ones and you become an Opry regular, which increases your price on the circuit, which means you hit the road again. Get so big that you land your own television show, which means you can be a sellout in any town where the show is seen, which means you're throwing money away if you don't take advantage of the situation, which means you say goodbye to Mama and the kids again. Ride out of your way to visit the jocks, or they stop playing your records. Spend time with the fans, or they stop buying your records. Write or find the right songs, or they stop *making* your records. It is a dizzy carousel with no rainchecks, and few who tried to get off have ever gotten back on. "When you're hot, you're hot," they say along Music Row, and those who have been around do not bother to add that when you're cold, you're dead.

Bill Anderson was paying the price, but as the Sixties came to an end he was one of only 15 or so entertainers out of Nashville ranked at the top of the pile in what is loosely called the superstar class. After pounding away for ten years he was now earning about $250,000 a year, had his own syndicated television show (shown in about 80 U.S. markets, plus to more than a million U.S. servicemen in 21 countries on the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service), earned $1,500 for a one-nighter, was one of the handsomest and most popular regulars at the Grand Ole Opry and had won more BMI awards for songwriting than anybody in the history of the awards. His income afforded him the two homes, two Cadillacs, one of the best (and best-paid) bands working out of Nashville, a full-time driver-mechanic to look after his customized bus, a personal manager, two secretaries, two dozen tailored show costumes that would retail at

$800 each, plus a publishing company of his own and a side venture called Bill Anderson Golden Guitar Shirts.

Although he had to put in his time in the minor leagues like all of the rest, Anderson made it much quicker than most. He was raised in Decatur, Ga., a suburb of Atlanta, where his father still has an insurance agency. While he was in high school he really wanted to be a baseball player, although he did have a country band and played at school dances and civic club meetings and on local television. The baseball dream was still with him when he entered the University of Georgia, but then he organized another band (wearing the bright red cowboy outfit and the white boots that Billy Dilworth remembers) and in the spring of his freshman year he entered and won a talent contest sponsored by the Athens Lions Club. He ditched baseball and began concentrating on his studies in the radio-television division of the school of journalism, harboring only vague notions about singing for a living ("This was something somebody else always did"). By his junior year in college, Anderson was living in Commerce, Ga., where he had an afternoon country music disc jockey show, commuting to classes at nearby Athens every morning, and in his spare time was writing his first songs. Late that year, 1957, he clipped the address of TNT Records in San Antonio from a catalogue and mailed them four songs, two of which were put on record. The record sold only a few copies, but it put Anderson's foot in the door.

"About a year later, I wanted very badly to put out another record," he says. He had been sitting on the roof of the two-story hotel where he lived in Commerce, and had been inspired to write a song called "City Lights" ("It *took* inspiration, if you have any idea how many city lights there are in Commerce"). So he put that song and another on tape and mailed the tapes off to TNT. "They said, 'Well, we don't really think we can sell a lot of 'em, but if it'll make you

happy and we can have publishing on the song we'll press you up about 500 records and send 'em back to you and you can sell 'em around locally.'" Anderson got his 500 records and either sold them or gave them away, but somehow "City Lights" was heard in Nashville and Ray Price put it on record and it became one of the big country songs of 1958. Anderson signed with Decca in August of that year (they didn't necessarily want him as a singer, but he used his songwriting talents as a club to get a recording contract), and a year later he had finished college and moved to Nashville for good. Only two years after that he was taken on as a regular by the Grand Ole Opry. In 1963 he wrote and recorded a lilting ballad-recitation called "Still," and it began winning so many plaques and trophies that he hardly knew where to put them. *Billboard* named him Top Country Songwriter for 1963 and '64, and the following year he was voted one of the top three country songwriters of all time. And yes, he still gets a small check in the mail once a year from TNT Records for royalties on the song he wrote while sitting high atop the hotel roof overlooking alluring Commerce, Ga., more than a dozen years ago.

Anderson's style is a curious blend of the old and the new. In the traditional vein, he dresses in gaudy Western-cut heavily rhinestoned costumes ("I feel they don't want to see you on the stage wearing the same thing as the guy sitting next to 'em in the audience"); he is, at best, an adequate singer, nicknamed "Whispering Bill" because of his thin voice ("Let's face it, I'm just a stylist like almost everybody else in our business"); the songs he writes are "weepers" about lost love or love regained; and he sometimes lapses into syrupy, religious overtones on stage ("Thanks so much for sharing this evening with us"). But he has brought newer talents to country music, things like business sense and showmanship and television looks and an intense (sometimes too intense) desire to be the nice guy with the jocks and the

1,500 members of his fan club (he receives an average of 500 pieces of fan mail each week). He drives himself incessantly (resulting in a nervous collapse in 1966), shows signs of keeping up with the newer songwriters in country music (a copy of Rod McKuen's "Lonesome Cities" is kept next to his bed), is very much aware of the network television possibilities opening up for country performers and will be able to quit the road when and if he desires because of the steady backlog of royalty-producing songs he has written (his check from BMI for 1968, for only *air play* of his songs, came to $37,000). In 1969 Decca produced a two-record album called "The Bill Anderson Story," a collection of his biggest hits, making him only the fifth country singer to be so honored. One of his biggest boosters is Hubert Long, who owes much of the initial success of Moss Rose Publications and Hubert Long International to Anderson's early songs, and Long sees Anderson as nothing less than the next Glen Campbell: "All he needs is a 'Phoenix.' He's better prepared for a big network television show than Campbell was, and it's just a matter of getting the break right now." Says Anderson: "I didn't plan anything that's happened so far. It happened very fast, but I didn't plan anything. I think when you plan things, maybe you make a mistake. I don't think Chet [Atkins], when he was at the stage in his career that I am in mine, saw himself as the executive and the successful record producer that he has turned out to be. An ultimate course is to do something related to the business without having to play one-night stands. And yet I think I'd be like Eddy Arnold; I think I'd miss it terribly if I didn't do some type of performing."

There was plenty of opportunity to perform during the early weeks of 1969, when Anderson and his band, the Po' Boys, hit the road on what would be the longest string of one-nighters they would play all year. Anderson had stayed

around Nashville during December to recharge his batteries for another year: writing, recording, taping TV shows, answering mail, looking after business, putting together the January tour, playing the Opry. By the end of the first week of January he had put "My Life" on record and taped a month's worth of "The Bill Anderson Show" at WSIX-TV in Nashville, and then he and the rest of the troupe had climbed aboard the luxury bus (nine bunks, two baths, a TV set, lockers for all) and ridden north where the money is: Altoona, Buffalo, Akron, and on into Canada; back to Erie, Rochester, Hartford and up to Canada again; south once more to Providence, Scranton and New Bedford. The tour, put together by a scowling, cigar-smoking Rochester promoter named Abe Hamza, may have been a back-breaker (nearly 6,000 miles in 24 days) but it was profitable: Anderson and the Po' Boys, as headliners, were being paid $1,250 for each of the 20 shows.

The crowds had been good all along the way, and the last night of January was no exception: some 3,500 had filled Symphony Hall in Newark for the show there, sponsored by WJRZ, one of the hot metropolitan stations, which was getting fat by feeding country music to the Southern transplants in the New York City area. To make the boys feel at home, a fat, pleasant woman who was nuts for Bill Anderson had even set up a table laden with cheese and sandwiches and coffee backstage ("I did the same thing two weeks ago when they was in Scranton"). And so on the following morning, a Saturday, spirits were relatively good as they piled onto the bus once more for the final leg: Syracuse that night, Boston Sunday night, then home to Nashville.

An icy rain was slanting down as Tom Griffith, a former Trailways driver who had been hired by Anderson to look after the bus and drive it full time, fought his way through the Manhattan traffic and looked for the right freeway to upstate New York. Anderson, singer Jan Howard and comedian

Don Bowman had stayed over in Manhattan to do some shopping and would take a Mohawk flight to Syracuse in the afternoon. While Griffith drove, the Po' Boys, pokered out after three weeks of togetherness, slept in their bunks. The bus was just beginning to unwind on the snow-banked Palisades Parkway north of the city when suddenly there was a booming voice out of nowhere, like the voice of God: "Pull off on the side of the road. Pull off the road. Pull off . . ." It was a highway patrol car, with two flashing lights and a loudspeaker mounted on its roof. Griffith cursed under his breath and slithered off the highway onto the snow-slick shoulder of the road. Two or three of the Po' Boys, jarred awake by the commotion, stumbled into the forward cabin of the bus in their wrinkled Western shirts and low-cut trousers and stockinged feet, rubbing the sleep from their eyes, to see what was going on. Griffith jerked the handle to open the door and a stumpy Irish cop in glistening black storm-trooper boots came aboard. The cop scowled first at Griffith, a lanky Southerner with a crewcut and long sideburns, then at the sleepy passengers staring back at him, then at a rhinestoned cowboy suit hanging from an overhead rack, then at the tooled-leather guitars sewn to the upholstery, and finally back at Griffith. He grunted and motioned for Griffith to come with him, and they walked back to the patrol car in the sleet. In about five minutes Griffith returned, jerked the door closed, slammed the bus into gear and eased onto the highway again. He was so mad he was shaking.

"What's up, hoss?" said Snuffy Miller, the drummer.

"The son of a bitch," Griffith said.

"He ticket you?"

"Said he should have."

"What'd you do wrong?"

"Said buses and trucks ain't supposed to be here. We gotta get off at the next exit. *Now* they tell me. Why don't they put up some signs you can read?"

"No sweat if you didn't get a ticket, hoss."

"Aw," Griffith said, "it's just the way these people are up here. He asked me who we were, and I said we're musicians. 'Where from?' he said, and I said Nashville. 'What *kind* of musicians?' he said. '*Country* music,' I told him. Then he says, 'Oh, you mean that *hoedown* stuff.' The son of a bitch."

Syracuse is a good town for country music, one of the regular stops on the Nashville circuit, and a big crowd was expected that night at the 7,000-seat War Memorial Auditorium. There had been an advance sale of some 5,000 tickets, averaging out at better than $4 each, and it looked like there would be a complete sellout. The heavy advance sale was testimony to the pulling power of Anderson's weekly television show, which was carried by a Syracuse station, and heavy promotion by WSEN, the local country radio station. Then, too, it was one of the more attractive packages on the road at the moment: Anderson and the other regulars on his TV show, Jan Howard and the Po' Boys and funnyman Don Bowman; Little Jimmy Dickens, standing five feet tall in high-heeled boots, with the nervous energy of a shoeshine boy, a crusty veteran who had hit it big some 20 years earlier with country-boy songs like "Take an Old Cold Tater and Wait" and "Sleepin' at the Foot of The Bed"; Kenny Price, billed as "The Round Mound of Sound" at 319 pounds ("This tailor down at Cincinnati Tent & Awning" makes his size 56 coats, he says), a bright newcomer out of Cincinnati; and Jack Greene, the "Jolly Greene Giant," who had recently quit after several years as Ernest Tubb's drummer to try it as a singer and had seen his first five releases zoom to the top of the charts. It was no surprise, then, to find fans waiting outside the auditorium when the mud-spattered Anderson bus (BILL ANDERSON AND THE PO' BOYS, GRAND OLE OPRY, said a sign on the back) rolled to a stop near the stage door entrance. A dozen of them were almost stapled to the door of the bus when it was cranked open. They stood on tiptoes,

craning their necks to get a glimpse of Anderson inside the bus, and they held cardboard boxes containing pickles, sandwiches, cakes and oranges, and albums to be autographed. As the Po' Boys hit the pavement their names were chanted by the fans and they were slapped on the back, as if they were the Red Sox bringing the pennant back to Boston.

"Hey, where's Bill at?" one of the fans said.

"He's flying up," somebody answered. "Him and Jan and Bowman."

"What time they supposed to get in?"

"Don't know. They left at three fifteen."

The fan, a man who looked to be in his mid-forties, looked up at the darkening sky. "Be a hell of a thing if they couldn't land." He set the box of goodies on the sidewalk and turned to his wife. "Guess all we can do is wait."

Dickens and Greene and their bands had been traveling separately on the tour—Dickens in a station wagon pulling a trailer full of baggage and instruments, Greene (with Price, not yet prosperous enough to have his own band, riding with him on this leg) in a gleaming silver camper bus. When Dickens and Greene pulled up behind Anderson's bus and parked at the curb, they all got out on the sidewalk and stretched their legs, also wondering if the Syracuse airport were socked in, then wandered off up the street to a hotel dining room for something to eat.

While a dozen of them sat at two tables jammed together in the near-empty dining room, the drinkers ordered doubles, and Gino King, a broad-shouldered lead guitarist in Dickens' band, counted the days he'd been away from home. "If I had any sense, I'd do what Bobby Cofer did," he said.

"Bobby Cofer, you know him?"

"Hell, *everybody* knows Cofer."

"What's he doing now?"

"Still looking for gold, I guess. In Alaska."

"Looking for gold?"

King spread his beefy elbows on the table. "Yeah, he heard about the gold they were finding up there and one day he just decided he'd quit all of that traveling and go up there and try to find some of it for himself. One of the first good steel-guitar men in the business, and he quit. He was panning gold all day and playing a club six nights a week there for a while, but he started doing good panning gold and pretty soon he was down to playing only two nights. Then he got to where he could pan seven thousand dollars' worth of gold during the summer, and so one day he took his guitar out to the backyard and buried it six feet deep and stuck a sign on top of the pile of dirt that said, 'Here Lies the Heart of Bob Cofer,' and as far as I know he's never played since then. Sometimes I get so tired of the road, I start wondering if there's any *more* of that gold up there."

When they returned to the auditorium, about an hour before the show was to start, the seats were already beginning to fill up. Anderson, Bowman and Jan Howard had landed at the Syracuse airport at about the same time the bus was pulling up in front of the auditorium, as it turned out, and now they were dressed and ready to go. Anderson, in fact, already had his hands full of fans who were thrusting programs and Bill Anderson albums in front of him to be autographed. One of them said she was a member of his fan club, from Auburn, N.Y., and owed her life to Anderson. "I was real sick about five years ago," she said, "and the doctors didn't have any idea what was wrong. They just thought it was in my mind. Nothing interested me. I just sat around all day, not doing anything. Well, my husband took me to Nashville to see the Grand Ole Opry, because all of us loved country music, and Bill played that night. I'd never even heard of him. That's when he was just starting and didn't even have his own band. Well, that did it. I fell in love with Bill Anderson and bought all of his records, even though we didn't have anything to

play 'em on. We saw 'em two weeks ago when they were in Rochester, and we couldn't miss 'em tonight."

While Anderson fended off his fans, Tom Griffith stood at a table in the foyer of the auditorium and sold 50-cent Bill Anderson souvenir booklets ("He maintains his warmth, earthiness, and inborn love for his fellow man . . . BILL ANDERSON . . . quite a guy!!") and the sidemen set up their instruments and amplifiers on stage. In one of the tiny dressing rooms backstage, Kenny Price played the tape from *his* latest recording session while three or four of the sidemen listened. One of the songs was called "One Little Face." In the song, a guy whose brother has no children considers giving up one of his four to bring the spark back to his brother's life; but when the time comes to choose which one he will give away, he looks at the four sleeping children and, in the last line of the song, decides he can't do it.

"Man, that knocks me out," Price said.

"You got a winner, Mound," said Gino King.

"Think so? I mean, really, what do you think?"

"I'm telling you. The title's perfect."

"I kinda like that, too. 'One Little Face.' I mean, you don't know until the end whether that means he did or didn't. You don't think it's too corny, do you?"

"Hell, no. Something like that could happen."

"You better believe I had a tough time cuttin' that thing," Price said. "They wanted to try one more take and I told 'em, 'There ain't no way.' I was so choked up, I don't think I could've done it one more time."

The format of the show was the same as it had been for the 18 previous stops: Dickens opening with all of the bouncy novelty numbers he had become famous for over the years, this lively little man stomping his boots through the floor and jumping around like an ill-tempered jockey, almost a caricature in an outsized ten-gallon hat and his gaudy "suit of

lights"; then Kenny Price, a happy fat man with a ringing good voice, the strap to his guitar sequined with the legend ROUND MOUND OF SOUND, getting heavy response from the crowd when he closed with "This Old Southern Boy Is Southern-Bound"; and finally, closing the first half, Jack Greene, tall and striking in a white Edwardian suit, his band in suits of shimmery light green, bringing squeals from the young girls as he ripped through a medley of the songs that had put him into big money virtually overnight. After Greene had taken two encores, the lights went up for a short intermission and the Po' Boys moved into position on stage behind the closed curtain for "The Bill Anderson Show."

This tour had marked the start of something new for Anderson, and it appeared to be working. Since his syndicated television show was the second-largest in country music, going into some 80 cities from Bangor to Los Angeles and from Miami to Fargo, not to mention the new exposure it would get on the recently announced signing with the Armed Forces network, he had decided to take Jan Howard and Don Bowman on the road with him to the areas where the TV show was being seen, and to tie in his promotions of the one-nighters with the television show. He would tape a short piece at WSIX-TV in Nashville to be tagged to the end of the half-hour TV show—"Jan Howard, Don Bowman, the Po' Boys and I will all be there Saturday night and we hope to see you there"—and in some towns it was possible for fans to watch "The Bill Anderson Show" on television in the late afternoon and then dress up and run down to see them all in person a couple of hours later. And the TV show, sponsored in most areas by Stanback headache powders, was by far the slickest production of all of the syndicated shows coming out of Nashville: Jan Howard, once married to top country songwriter Harlan Howard, well preserved in spite of three childbirths and the years on the road, an attractive brown-eyed redhead who was consistently hitting the charts now; Don

Bowman, a wisecracking country version of Brother Dave Gardner, a little guy whose departure from the usual corn of hayseed country comedians keeps him in hot water with fans who grew up listening to people like Minnie Pearl and the Duke of Paducah ("I've just had to accept the fact," says Anderson, "that when we get back home from a tour there'll be letters from little old ladies complaining about some of Don's material"); the Po' Boys, especially rubber-faced drummer Snuffy Miller, who is likely to bawl into a handkerchief while Anderson croons one of his weepers; and, of course, Anderson himself, easily the fastest on his feet of any country performer on television this side of Glen Campbell. All along this tour, then, there had been a definite pattern: crowds were nearly twice as large in cities where the TV show was seen.

The Syracuse show turned out to be the best of the entire tour. Dickens, Price and Greene had all been wildly applauded, and when the curtain went up for the second half the crowd of 6,500 was ready. Jimmy Gateley, Anderson's front man, sang a couple of songs and was treated like a star. Then Anderson came on in a stunning orange suit sparkling with sequins, and his medley of hits ("Still," "I Love You Drops," "Happy State of Mind," et al) brought the house down. Snuffy Miller began cutting up, setting up a mock argument between him and Anderson ("If you don't mind, I'm *trying* to sing"; "Well, *keep trying*"). Bowman came out and sat on a stool and turned on the crowd ("I gotta get back to the motel and check the traps"), and then Jan Howard came on to do a few of her own songs and team up with Anderson on some of the duets they had recorded. It was here, toward the end of the show, that the icing went on the cake. Back in Nashville two months earlier, while he was putting the show together, Anderson had decided to end it with a patriotic flourish to counter the student antiwar demonstrations going on around the country. He worked up a two-minute speech

on the virtues of patriotism ("There are a lot of people around today with long hair knocking our country, and I'm glad to say there aren't any of those here tonight"). Then Jan, who had lost a son in Vietnam just as Decca released a song of hers called "My Son" (based on a letter she had written him praying he would be back home with her soon), would sing "God Bless America." And then, the grand finale, the entire company would burst into Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land." Considering the politics of any country-music audience, it was a natural at every show. On this night in Syracuse, Anderson gave his patriotic spiel and then Jan Howard methodically went into "God Bless America." But she had a hard time finishing this time: while spotlights played across her face and the four huge American flags and the inscription IN MEMORY OF OUR SERVICE VETERANS above the curtain, the crowd rose as one and began singing with her; and when she did finish singing, her voice beginning to break, she burst into tears and ran off the stage. Anderson stepped forward to say, "You see, Jan Howard's son was one of those who gave his life for his country," and then they ended it with a resounding version of "This Land Is Your Land." Maybe some of Anderson's facts about Vietnam and "long-hairs" were wrong, but nobody seemed to notice.

It took Anderson nearly an hour to break away from the crowd on stage after the show, and so it was well past midnight when the bus crawled away from the city and headed for Boston and the last stop on the tour. Guitarist Jimmy Lance, who earns an extra $100 a month as relief driver, was taking the 315 miles to Boston so Tom Griffith could sleep and gear himself for the next night's nonstop run back home to Nashville. Just before 1 A.M., after a quick stop at an all-night cheap hamburger joint for nourishment, they came to the entry to the turnpike from Syracuse to Boston. Jan Howard had gone off into a fitful sleep following her ordeal on stage, and most of the others were also asleep. Anderson was

in his private quarters in the rear cabin, changing into a baggy sweater and slacks, when Lance stopped at the toll gate.

A middle-aged woman was on duty. When she saw the sign BILL ANDERSON on the bus, instead of simply handing Lance a ticket she came out of the booth and, with a smile on her face, stood in the shivering cold and said to Lance through the side window of the bus, "*What* Bill Anderson?"

"Ma'am?" said Lance.

"The one from Nashville? The one on TV?"

"Yes'm."

"I want to meet him."

Impatient to be on the road, Lance said, "He's asleep."

"Well, wake him up."

"Ma'am?"

"Now, I've made up my mind I'm going to meet Bill Anderson. You go back there and wake him up, or I won't give you a ticket and they'll arrest you when you try to get off."

Anderson was weaving toward the front of the bus about that time, still buttoning his sweater, to see what was the matter. The woman gasped when she saw him in the pale light. Anderson leaned over Lance when he realized what was happening and stuck his hand through the window. "Did you get to see our show tonight?" he said. "No, but I watch you boys on TV all the time," she said, flustered to be actually talking to him. Finally she gave the toll ticket to Lance and said, "You boys be careful, now," as Lance roared off onto the dark highway for the monotonous haul through the upstate New York snow to New England. They got into downtown Boston on a clear, cold Sunday morning at 7 o'clock, and Lance was parking the bus across the street from the Sheraton-Plaza just as a modified panel truck with B.B. KING on the back was being loaded up. "If the Sheraton-Plaza's good enough for B.B. King, it's good enough for us," said Anderson. He went into the quiet lobby and bargained

for day rates, and soon they were all in fresh beds catching up on their sleep.

The Boston date was anticlimactic after Syracuse. It was sponsored by WCOP, another Plough station, and held at Symphony Hall, home of the Boston Pops and site of a concert by Spanish guitarist Andrés Segovia earlier that afternoon ("Now that warps my brain," said Snuffy Miller, "playing the same place that cat played the same day"). WCOP had been producing quarterly "Shower of Stars" programs, touting them heavily over the air, and some 5,000 had turned out for the first one starring Buck Owens and the Buckaroos in October, but only 2,000 came for the Anderson show and it was obvious they weren't familiar with his television show. Anderson toned down his "long-hair" monologue in Boston, home of such centers of student dissent as Harvard and Brandeis ("Now, I'm not talking about *everybody* who has long hair"). After the show, he went out for a wee-hours dinner with Abe Hamza, the promoter, and he awakened early Monday morning to talk in his suite with a Boston advertising representative for Homelite chain saws, which was negotiating to pick up sponsorship of the television show in certain markets ("We'll get a picture of you in your yard using one of these, with your family in the background"), and at last he went to the airport with Kenny Price for the flight home.

"The new record out yet?" Price said as they waited.

"Yeah. We heard it in Newark the other day."

"I hear it's a good song."

"Different, anyway," Anderson said. He had rings under his eyes now. He was whipped after three solid weeks on the road. Later that week they would have to film a couple of songs in Nashville for a low-budget country-music movie and tape some more television shows, but there would be breathing room for the next week or so and he intended to take full advantage of it.

"All I ever wanted to do was pick and sing," he said.

"Huh?"

"All of this other stuff drives you squirrelly."

"Yeah, sure. Countin' money takes a lot of time."

"No, I'm serious," Anderson said. "When I went to Nashville, all I thought I'd be doing was picking and singing. I'm going to go home to that lake house and crawl under the covers and I'm going to stay there for two days."

When the plane was announced, Anderson and Price fell in line and walked across the frozen concrete to the plane and wearily mounted the steps. Over WCOP a pair of Bill Anderson's boots were being auctioned off for a charity, but Boston was already behind him. He was thinking about the dust and the spoiled milk and the weeds at the lake house in Nashville, and how he and his wife would go out to dinner that night to talk things over, and whether the new record was going to do well on the charts:

You try to make me think my non-conforming life
Has colored me some evil shade;
You delight in filling up my mind with
Little bits of guilt you think I oughta feel;
Well I'm tired of feelin' guilty,
And I'm tired of havin' nothin',
And I'm throwin' away this life you've had me shackled to;
It's my life, throw it away if I want to. . . .

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EPILOGUE

SATURDAY NIGHT AT THE OPRY

> Judge Hay would be turning over in his grave if he were here now, seeing men dressing the way they are and hearing the kind of music they're doing. Every Saturday night, just before it was time for the Opry to start, he'd go backstage and say, "Let's keep it close to the ground, boys."
>
> —GRANT TURNER, VETERAN OPRY ANNOUNCER

Downtown Nashville, late Saturday afternoon, the sun now hidden behind the tall buildings lining the ridge above the Cumberland River, bringing darkness, the great beautician, to the ominously ugly Grand Ole Opry House. The corner of Broadway and Opry Place, a pop-art poster of arc-light blues and headlight yellows and gleaming campers in the parking lots with fading Wallace-for-President stickers on their sides. Up and down Broadway, the neon lights blinking Peoples Furniture Co., Linebaugh's Restaurant ("Where the Opry

Stars Meet to Eat"), Music City Playhouse ("star-studded motion-picture story of the Grand Ole Opry"), and Roy Acuff Exhibits, Sho-Bud Guitars, Friedman's Loan Office, Tootsie's Orchid Lounge. Musical entertainment courtesy of the record shops, Ernest Tubb's on one side of the street and Buckley's No. 2 on the other, booming the voices of Johnny Cash and Loretta Lynn at each other, a battle of sound systems, artillery batteries unloading at point-blank range. A small-town disc jockey up from South Georgia for the weekend, standing on the corner with a portable tape recorder, asking passersby where they are from and if this is their first visit to the Opry. A gold Cadillac easing into the parking lot behind the Opry House, unloading a star, twinkling like a firefly in his "suit of lights." And strolling the sidewalks on Broadway, the couples who have driven all day for this: white middle-class Southern transplants now stationed in Gary and Cincinnati and Chicago where the jobs are, the men in crewcuts and windbreakers and Hush Puppies, their women in frost-tipped bouffant hairdos and slacks and Pilgrim loafers; he wants a beer at Tootsie's but she says it's nothing but a honky-tonk, she wants a plastic Jesus for the dashboard but he says they cramp your style when you're driving; continuing hand in hand down the sidewalk, window-shopping and checking the time and standing on curbs, like so many Adams and Eves in their own peculiar Garden of Eden.

The Tennessee Gift Shop, next door to the Opry. A young couple, maybe early thirties, in his-and-hers nylon zipper jackets with Confederate flags sewn on the back, LOUISE embroidered beneath her flag and DOYLE stitched under his. Walking between the tables of red satin gold-fringed pillowcases decorated with poems to Mother, kitchen plaques, personalized automobile tags, passion meters, framed words-to-live-by ("Old Fishermen Never Die, They Just Smell That Way"), welcome mats, decals, and dinner plates with a por-

trait of John F. Kennedy. And a paper clock for the wall with nothing but 5's on the face and the inscription HOUSE RULES: NO DRINKING 'TIL FIVE—

I'd like to have me one of those.

They're tacky.

Be fun at a party.

Can't you think about anything except drinking?

Yeah, but you don't believe in *that,* either.

—and then, when they can stand it no longer, out the door of the Tennessee Gift Shop and up the sidewalk to the wide, worn steps of the Grand Ole Opry House itself to get in line and wait to go inside. A lot of people on the steps already.

Been waiting long?

'Bout ten minutes. Where y'all from?

East Tennessee. Living up in Akron right now. Y'all got tickets?

Sure have. We come up from Chattanooga this morning. Me and the wife here, we was waiting in line when they opened up and started selling 'em. Any other time of the year, they'd o' been sold out two months ago. Akron, Ohio?

Uh-huh. Working in the tire plant up there.

Akron's a long way, ain't it?

'Bout five hundred miles. Had to get up at four this morning.

Tire plant, you say?

That's right.

Hey, that reminds me. You hear the one about this old boy that wanted to get a job in the bloomer plant?

Ralph, for God's *sake.*

Naw, I didn't hear that one yet. The *bloomer* plant?

Yeah, bloomer plant. He heard you could pull down forty a night.

You *men.*

Yeah, *you men.* Uh-huh. Doris here, she almost broke a strap laughing, first time she heard it.

I'll have to take that one back to Akron with me, all right. Hey, how do you find out who's gonna be here tonight? They got a program or something?

Got one tacked up inside the door there.

Looks like they'd put it in the paper.

Who'd you want to know about?

Hank Snow. Him and Dottie West. Louise here, she's crazy about Dottie West.

Well, you're lucky. Both of 'em's here tonight.

I must be living right or something. First time we come to the Opry and old Hank's here. Understand he stays on the road a lot, doing concerts. Hot-damn, it's colder'n a well-digger's . . . *toes* out here. Sure wish we'd o' gone down to Tootsie's for some antifreeze first. I swear I think that's how come Louise here likes Dottie West so much. Dottie, she looks like she'd pass out if somebody took a drink in front of her.

If you were raised some 20 years ago in a place like Hamilton, Ala., or Norman, Okla., or Hazard, Ky., your Saturday nights took on a definite pattern. Once the chores were done and night began to close in, the entire family would huddle around the big Zenith radio in the living room and the old man would start hunting for 650 on the dial, for clear-channel WSM, "the broadcasting service of the National Life and Accident Insurance Company, Nashville, Tennessee," for the Grand Ole Opry. Then, until midnight, weary legs and cracked hands and broken spirits would be resurrected by the familiar sounds crackling over the radio: Ernest Tubb's bullfrog voice singing "Walkin' the Floor Over You," and Hank Williams yodeling his "Lovesick Blues," and Roy Acuff wailing "Great Speckled Bird" as silvery ribbons of tears streamed down his deep-ridged face, and the crowd at Ryman Auditorium in Nashville whooping at the absurdity of Cousin Minnie Pearl, in that store-bought hat with the

price tag still dangling, giving out the latest gossip from her make-believe town (or was it?), Grinder's Switch. The Opry leaves an indelible scar on your heart when you have let it be that big a part of your young life, like the mark left by your mother's love, and a dream that won't let you go is the dream of one day going to Nashville and entering the same old auditorium and sitting through a whole night of the Opry. The dream is even more important, of course, to those who learn how to pick a guitar or sing. A country boy with a guitar dreams of playing on the stage of the Opry just as fervently as a kid with a baseball bat dreams of one day stepping into the batter's box at Yankee Stadium. The Opry is country music's Yankee Stadium and Carnegie Hall and White House. "The Opry," says General Manager Bud Wendell, "is the end of the rainbow."

It has changed a great deal in recent years, of course, just as country music and those who make it have changed. The dress, for one thing, used to be cowboy boots and ten-gallon hats and flowery-patterned Western-cut suits heavy on the rhinestones for the male singers, and dainty little hoop-skirted Gone With the Wind dresses for the girls, and comedians in high-button shoes and stringy red wigs and baggy suits made from old Purina feed sacks; now you see a guy like Stu Phillips coming on in a standard black tuxedo, and a girl singer named Margie Bowes bouncing to the microphones looking like a lady astronaut in a shimmery black rhinestoned miniskirt and silver knee-length boots, and comedian Don Bowman doing his thing from a stool, dressed in a cuffless, beltless, Continental-cut iridescent blue suit and buckled Italian loafers. You still have Roy Acuff and Ernest Tubb and Hank Snow and Grandpa Jones, sure, but you also have snare drums and electrified instruments and flat-out rock 'n' roll. One of the few things about the Grand Ole Opry that has not changed in some 45 straight years of broadcasting, in fact, and will probably not change even when the

show is moved into its new antiseptic, air-conditioned, bucket-seated palace, is its almost complete spontaneity. "The Opry has always been a big picnic in itself," its originator, George D. Hay, wrote nearly 25 years ago. It still is a picnic, except the food is a little fancier.

The last Saturday of January meant warmer weather in Nashville, although an icy wind still whipped up from the river and the weatherman was predicting more snow before spring came. This meant a return of the crowds, which always dip to their lowest point in the first weeks of the year when—too bad for the fans—most of the Opry regulars are still holidaying and the best shows of the year are held (the first Opry of the year had featured all but 14 of the Opry's 57 regulars, but the balcony of the Opry House had been only half full). By 7:30 that night, then, when Grant Turner and singer-comic Archie Campbell had finished the Opry Warmup record show from the stage and an announcer was saying, "Welcome to the Graaand Ole Op-reee," the old auditorium was bulging with a capacity crowd. While Jim Ed Brown, Skeeter Davis and Justin (son of Ernest) Tubb were kicking off the night's opening half-hour portion, the Goo-Goo Cluster Candy Bar show, those who would be on later hobnobbed backstage as if it were old home week. The only man in the house not completely enjoying himself, in fact, was a young man named Alan Nelson, who is in charge of public relations for WSM and once wrote a superpatriotic recitation called "Day for Decision," under a nom de plume. At the moment he had his eyes glued on two college-age boys who wore beards and long hair and war-surplus jackets and stood next to a water cooler taking notes.

"I never heard of it myself," Nelson was saying.

"Liberation Press? It's a college thing," he was told.

"What, a college press association?"

"Yeah, sort of a hippies' AP. They doing a story on the Opry?"

"That's what they *said.* I told 'em Flatt and Scruggs weren't working tonight, but they came anyway. I put in a little call to the boys just to let 'em know who was in town."

"The boys?"

"Metro police," Nelson said. "They were glad I called."

The backstage area at the Opry swarms with stars and sidemen and announcers and stagehands and guards and fans who have somehow slipped past the guards, like fingerling trout flashing in a hatchery pool. Off one side of the stage a slim corridor leads to a sort of foyer with a wall of framed color portraits of the Opry regulars and a battery of mail slots (the Opry is a registered post office) and, behind a door, the general manager's tiny office. Off the other side of the stage is where the action is. The guard is on his feet at the sprung-hinged back door, patiently explaining to three teen-age girls why they can't come backstage with their Instamatic flash-cube cameras. A sideman in somebody's band is sitting next to the water cooler getting his shoes shined by a hunched-over old black man. A singer named Ray Pillow, in a tight-fitting Western outfit of indescribable orange and countless rhinestones, checks the typewritten sheet on a bulletin board nailed to the wall to see what time he goes on. Archie Campbell rears back in a lawn chair in one of the three bare-bulbed "dressing rooms," looking very Continental with a trim Tennessee Ernie Ford mustache and a long cigar, explaining to somebody why he didn't accept Richard Nixon's personal invitation to go to Washington for the Inauguration ("Too damn much trouble"). In another of these odd-shaped rooms, Wilma Lee and Stoney Cooper stand amid clothes racks and empty Coke cartons and a church pew while they tune up with their band for the eight o'clock Martha White Flour Mills show. And in the runway leading

from the dressing rooms to the stage, a popular oldtime banjo picker called Stringbean (David Akeman, really) leans against the wall in the costume he has worn on the Opry for 25 years: trousers sewn to the tail of an extra-long shirt, the belt just above his knees, making him appear four feet long from the waist up and two feet from the waist down. "Yah, it happened, all right," he was saying. "I was on this TV show in Chicago, and some engineer up in a booth looked at his monitor and said, 'There ain't no way.' When he tried to adjust the thingamajig, whatever you call it, he messed up a million TV sets." Jim Ed Brown was introducing Stringbean now, so he broke off his story and dashed onto the stage to do his first number of the night.

Those who were not back in the dressing rooms had created another traffic jam directly offstage, where they stood and tuned instruments or peeked out at the crowd or bugged the two young girls who sit at an elevated table so they can keep up with the number of shows worked by the sidemen. Dottie West, who sings like a church-choir soprano and looks like a demure Southern belle in her billowy skirts, was admiring the color snapshots two lady friends had brought backstage ("And he's *grown* so since I saw him last"). Somebody complimented Mel Tillis, a wiry young singer in an all-black Western suit and cowboy boots, on his latest record, "Who's Julie?" which tells about a guy who talks in his sleep and is asked by his wife "over coffee just this morning" who is the girl he was talking about. "My wife doesn't c-care for it much," said Tillis, who stutters badly except when he sings. "When it first c-came out she asked me, 'Who *is* Julie?' and I t-told her, 'Oh, it's just my r-r-racehorse up in Kentucky.' Well, I went on the r-road for a couple of w-w-weeks, and when I got back home my wife said, 'You had a c-call while you were gone,' and I said, 'Wh-wh-who was it?' and she said, 'Y-y-your racehorse.'"

When the first show ended at eight, a red light backstage

blinked on to warn everybody that another flat would be dropped and the curtain was pulled while an announcer read a commercial and Roy Acuff and the Smoky Mountain Boys set up for the Martha White Flour Mills half-hour. Acuff ("The Great Acuff," it read on the typed bulletin-board schedule backstage) was his usual self. He wore a loud checked sports coat, string tie, dark trousers and white low-cut tennis shoes. When he was introduced and the curtain opened, he broke into "Wabash Cannonball," and during the instrumental breaks balanced his fiddle bow on his nose or "walked the dog" with his Yo-Yo. The crowd applauded, but few ran down to the foot of the stage to take pictures and the applause seemed to be subdued. Then Acuff brought on a hefty young man named Bob Luman, and school was out. Luman is from the school of rockabillies who came along with the rock 'n' roll craze in the Fifties, country singers doing rock, and he comes on like a riot squad. He ran onto the stage in a white turtleneck and a shimmery royal-blue suit, yelling at the crowd ("Now you're gonna get it!!" and "Sock it to me, son!!"), swinging his guitar, and in seconds he was jolting the crowd with an upbeat Presley-type song called "Come On Home and Sing the Blues to Daddy," which had begun to climb in the charts. He got an encore—he *took* an encore—and finally blew off stage, bending at the knees and skipping away, like a tornado leaving town. "I *guess* it's all right," Acuff told the crowd, only a faint smile on his face.

Luman drifted around for a few minutes, joking with a toothless veteran comic named Cousin Jody ("Jody, you're getting so pretty I can't stand it") and the others waiting to go on the 8:30 Stephens Work Clothes show. Since he had nearly two hours before he would work again ("No need even trying to wake 'em up before ten-thirty"), he ducked out the side stage door and raced through the cold night air, across an alley already mined with autograph hunters, bolted

across a shallow ditch and slipped into the back room upstairs at Tootsie's. He spoke to a handful of stars and sidemen who had already taken up their positions around a shaky table in the dark, and then sat at a table against the wall and ordered a Country Club Malt Liquor.

Almost everybody in Nashville likes Luman. He is thirty, a little heavy around the middle, with merry blue eyes and a good word for anybody (you get the idea his "feud" with Acuff, et al, is merely good business, like the feuds of pro wrestling). His marriage appears to be in better shape than most of those in Nashville, and he is obviously more careful about his money than the majority of country stars: although he doesn't write, and his biggest single ("Let's Think About Living," 1960) earned only $30,000 for him, he has a sprawling home across the street from Johnny Cash's $250,000 palace on Old Hickory Lake in Hendersonville. Since he doesn't write and hasn't had the really big record sales, he has to knock himself out on the road from Boston to Sacramento to keep up with the bills.

The biggest event in Bob Luman's life came while he was in high school in Kilgore, Texas. He had a cowboy band and was interested in entertaining, but his major interest was baseball (the following spring, after graduation from high school, he was scheduled to report to the Pittsburgh Pirates' minor league camp in Florida). All of that ended, though, when a girl in his school came to class one day and breathlessly described an entertainer she had seen the night before. "She was really knocked out," Luman was saying. "She said, 'You ain't gonna believe this guy.' I got so interested I told my girl we were going to go, and we did. Man, I *didn't* believe it. This cat came out in red pants and a green coat and a pink shirt and socks, and he had this sneer on his face and he stood behind the mike for five minutes, I'll bet, before he made a move. Then he hit his guitar a lick, and he broke two strings. Hell, I'd been playing ten years and I hadn't broken a

total of two strings. So there he was, these two strings dangling, and he hadn't done anything except break the strings yet, and these high-school girls were screaming and fainting and running up to the stage, and then he started to move his hips real slow like he had a thing for his guitar. That was Elvis Presley when he was about nineteen, playing Kilgore, Texas. He made chills run up my back. Man, like when your hair starts grabbing at your collar. For the next nine days he played one-nighters around Kilgore, and after school every day me and my girl would get in the car and go wherever he was playing that night. That's the last time I tried to sing like Webb Pierce or Lefty Frizzell." Luman gave up his baseball dreams just as quickly as he ditched the hard country-and-Western music he had been raised on, and turned his life around overnight. Shortly after that he won a talent contest and was taken on as a regular by the "Louisiana Hayride" in Shreveport to replace Cash, who had just heard the call from the Opry. After recording "Let's Think About Living" and "Great Snowman" and a string of other records that had decent sales, plus logging some time at the clubs in Las Vegas where his rockabilly style was a smash, Luman became a regular on the Opry and moved to Nashville in 1965.

"I don't have anything against Acuff and those guys," Luman said as he ordered another beer. "They're just doing their own thing. But I think there's a place for all of these different styles in country music, and I get a little hacked off at some of those who don't like what I'm doing. I know Wesley Rose [of Acuff-Rose Publications] doesn't care for it. I mean, hell, what do you expect? He's been here a long time and works with Roy [Acuff] and had Hank [Williams]. For four years I was a tax deduction over there. I wasn't a writer, and Wesley wanted me to do hard country. I'll tell you one thing, though, when I came here I got dust out of the cracks that settled when Hank died. I did 'Memphis' when Ott Devine was about to leave the Opry. Man, I had 'em throw-

ing those funeral-parlor fans in the air. When I finished, Ott came over to me, mad as hell, and said, 'What are you *do*ing?' Then Bud came to the Opry, and the first night he was in charge I came out with something like ten sidemen when I was only supposed to have, like, four. All he said was, 'Bob, do you need that many musicians?' And I said, 'Do you want me to entertain 'em, or put 'em to sleep like those billies do?' He smiled and said, 'Entertain 'em,' and walked away. He's never said another word about me using more sidemen than I'm supposed to. Hell, he's in business. He's supposed to give those people a show."

It was getting close to ten o'clock now, and Luman had to get back and start rounding up sidemen for his second show. Two young girls had been sitting at the next table, ogling him for nearly an hour, and when he got up to leave they became flustered. "Bob?" one of them blurted. "Aren't you Bob Luman?"

"Yes," he said, standing over their table.

"Would you do us a favor?"

"If I can."

"Can you do 'Let's Think About Living' on the second show?"

"I'll try my best," Luman said. "I've got to do 'Guitar Man,' but if they let me do two songs I'll do that one for *you*."

"Thank you, Bob."

"Thank *you*."

"Bye, Bob."

"I'll see ya," he said, scrambling out the back door and leaping the alley and bursting past the guard at the stage door. When Luman rumbled into the backstage area his first words were, "All right, I want ten good men."

To the traditionalists it is almost sacrilegious to have a Bob Luman on the hallowed Grand Ole Opry ("That kind of

music has no place on the Opry," says Wesley Rose), but Opry officials like to emphasize the liberal nature of the show these days, and as a result Luman almost always appears on either the Roy Acuff or Bill Monroe portion. This night, on the second go-around, Luman was working the 10:30 Buckley's Record Shop show, which starred Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys and included Luman, Stringbean and straight-country singer Ray Pillow. When Acuff finished his Pure Oil show at 10:30, there was a flurry on the creaking old stage as Buckley's flats ("We Mail Anywhere") were lowered into place for a backdrop, and the Bluegrass Boys positioned themselves behind the closed curtain, dressed in black tuxedos and ten-gallon hats, looking as grim as life-insurance agents delivering a death payoff—a mandolin, a banjo, a bass, a guitar and two fiddles—Monroe ("the father of Bluegrass," who gave Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs their start in his band) holding his mandolin at the ready while he looked up at the glassed-in control booth for the signal to start. When the curtain swung open, the crowd hooted and stomped as the Bluegrass Boys flew into a classic Bluegrass tune with the haunting sound of unamplified fiddle runs and a flying bass and a sprightly mandolin, hinting of the bagpipe sound that Arthur Young had created on his old canestalk fiddle that crisp Sunday afternoon in his cabin in the hills of Northeast Georgia.

Before the Bluegrass Boys had even finished, Luman and the platoon-sized band of sidemen he had conscripted were moving in on center stage. "All right, who's my quarterback?" yelled Luman, standing behind Monroe amid a collection of musicians clearly delighted over the prospects of helping him cause a riot: two lead guitars, two electric bass guitars, a rhythm guitar, a piano, a steel guitar, a tambourine, a drum and even a harmonica (borrowed from, of all places, Acuff's band). There was a Buckley's commercial, once the

Bluegrass Boys had finished, and then Monroe introduced Luman in his droll Appalachian twang. At the mention of Luman's name the crowd, remembering him from two hours earlier, cheered wildly as he attacked the microphone and laughed at the younger fans already scurrying down the aisles with their flash cameras and held his guitar ear-high to hit the first licks of a song called "Guitar Man."

"Guitar Man" shows Luman at his best. It is a hard-beat rock song that has been recorded by Presley and most of the others of that ilk, about a boy quitting his job and heading for Memphis to pick his guitar for a living. There is a break after the first few bars, at a point when Luman says, "and they wouldn't hire me," when Luman ad libs any number of singsong lines with only a drumbeat behind him. When the break came on this night, he decided to pick on Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys: " . . . and they wouldn't hire me." *Drumbeat-drumbeat-drumbeat-drumbeat.* "No they wouldn't, uh-uh, no sir, ain't no way, wouldn't hire me, no no, *yippy-ki-yo-ki-yo-ki-yay,* Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys." Swinging his guitar above his head saying, "Sock it to me, son," picking licks that sound like *do-be-do-be-do-be-dum,* then pressing on into another chorus with this electrified firing squad behind him about to break up from laughing and simply having fun shattering the rafters. The crowd went wild, as they usually do, and Luman responded with one encore ("You're fan*tas*tic!!" he yelled at them) and another ("I'm gonna milk you like Jersey Farms!!") before crouching and skipping off stage, being applauded almost as much by his colleagues backstage as he had been by the audience, sweat pouring down his red face, hardly able to stop moving even though it was over for another week at least, and the sidemen who had played with him crowding around and wheezing in jubilation like a football team that has just scored a touchdown. Poor Stringbean. Nobody even heard Bill Monroe introduce him as "The Kentucky Wonder."

WSM bleeds one more hour out of its Saturday-night audience by following up the Opry with a midnight-to-1 A.M. live broadcast from the Ernest Tubb Record Shop, the "Midnight Jamboree." Unless Marty Robbins or somebody equally strong is scheduled on the last half-hour portion at the Opry (Robbins always works the last show when he's in town, and if the crowd is receptive he refuses to stop and often runs to 12:30, to the consternation of WSM engineers concerned with broadcast timetables and sponsors and such), many in the audience will leave around eleven o'clock to be sure they can squeeze into Tubb's place for the show. Whenever Tubb and his Texas Troubadours are in town they headline the hour of music and record-pitching ("You can order this fine album by mail, from Ernest Tubb's Record Shop"), but when they are on the road, arrangements are made to bring over an Opry star and one or two unknowns, often making their first public appearance in Nashville, to fill up the time. The "Midnight Jamboree" hitch may not pay much, but most stars welcome the chance to work it because that same Opry radio audience is out there hanging on to the sweet end.

With Tubb and the Texas Troubadours playing a string of one-nighters in Texas that week, Bob Luman had been invited over for the Jamboree. After his victory at the 10:30 Opry he walked through the back alley from the Opry House to Tubb's, where a sizable crowd already waited inside, the tables of albums shoved to the rear of the store to make room for them, a cop already warning people not to stand in the window, so the people on the sidewalk outside could also see. At midnight, Luman and five sidemen stood on a wooden platform at the back end of the store and went to work for the more than 150 who had managed to squeeze their way in. Luman did his latest release, "Come On Home and Sing the Blues to Daddy" ("If you don't know it, boys, it starts in *C*, and if you get lost just go to *G* and wait"), joked about how

every time a record has hit for him he has been promptly called into the Army Reserves ("Now I don't mind going again if they want me, but it looks to me like they ought to get Cassius to go with me"), introduced a frightened little girl doing her first "Jamboree," sang "Memphis," read the upcoming Texas dates of Tubb and the Troubadours, did "Guitar Man" one more time, signed 15 minutes' worth of autographs and then hustled over to Tootsie's for a beer before she broke out her diamond hatpin and cleaned house.

Once inside and out of the cold at Tootsie's, Luman stowed his guitar case between the cigarette machine and the wall and took a seat in the front booth. "That's a great show to do," he said. "You figure every club in the South is letting out just when you go on, and they're listening to you on the car radio while they're driving home." Charlene came over, a frown on her face, and said if he wanted a beer he'd better be quick about drinking it. There were no more than ten late drinkers in the place, and Luman said he'd take a Country Club and be finished with it before they were through.

"I've got to get some rest," he said when Charlene had left. "Got a tough trip coming up. Driving all the way to the Coast."

"Driving?"

"Kind of working my way out."

"Who wants to *drive* that far?" he was asked.

"Ah, it's not that bad. New Cadillac? Hell, when you get there you'll feel like you'd been down the block in a pickup. Besides, you can't work the deejays when you're flying. What I'll do is fill up the trunk with albums, and every time I see a tower I'll stop and give 'em an album and get interviewed, and then press on to the next one."

Two couples had been sitting in the next booth when Luman came in, and they had been looking at him and whisper-

ing the whole time. When Tootsie gave the order to move out, they got up and stopped by Luman's booth. "Yeah, we come up from Shelbyville for the Opry tonight," one of the men said. "Gotta be getting back. Try to catch you every time we come, though, Bob. We're fans of yours. Hey, I really like that *ki-yi-yippy-ki-yo* thing you do." They moved out the front door, all except a cute blonde who stayed at the table.

"Could I have your autograph, Bob?" she cooed.

"Sure," he said. "Where?"

"Right here," she said, handing him an Opry program. She slid into the booth, very close to Luman.

"What's your name?"

"Faye Taylor."

"*F–A–Y?*"

"No, with an *e. F–A–Y–E.*"

"To Faye Taylor. Okay?"

"Fine," the girl said, looking right through Luman's eyes. "Just fine."

When the girl had left, Luman wheezed and threw a leg up in the booth. It was the same booth where, late on another night after another Opry, Tommy Higgins had sat and plotted his next move, a step ahead of hunger. *Tell you what's gonna happen,* Tommy Higgins had said. *I got it figured out. I'm gonna stick around until I find out whether I can write songs. And if it turns out I can't, then I'm gonna find out why I can't. I got a feel for it. I ain't gonna quit. Nossir, I ain't gonna . . .*

"You ought to see some of these little towns out in Texas and Arizona, way out there in the middle of nowhere. Nothing but one long street with some buildings on both sides, and right down at the end of the street there's always a little building with a radio station in it and this big tower sticking out of it. Man, all you got to do is look for towers. You can see 'em from fifteen miles away. Whip off the main road, fol-

low the tower, jump out with a record in your hand. Bob Luman. Play my record? Nice meetin' ya. How far to the next tower?" Luman climbed out of the booth, picked up his guitar case and fished for a tip to leave for Charlene. "God," he said, "I need a hit."

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